



This **second** volume of X-Force collects the first 27 issues, written by various authors.

Enjoy!

# Table of Contents

#1 by David Wheatley .....	2
#2 by David Wheatley .....	12
#3 by David Wheatley .....	22
#4 by David Wheatley .....	30
#5 by David Wheatley .....	39
#6 by David Wheatley .....	51
#7 by D. Golightly & C. Wiegel .....	62
#8 by D. Golightly & C. Wiegel .....	75
#9 by D. Golightly & C. Wiegel .....	90
#10 by D. Golightly & C. Wiegel .....	106
#11 by D. Golightly & C. Wiegel .....	118
#12 by D. Golightly & C. Wiegel .....	132
#13 by Dino Pollard .....	148
#14 by Dino Pollard .....	156
#15 by Dino Pollard .....	164
#16 by Dino Pollard .....	176
#17 by Dino Pollard .....	185
#18 by Dino Pollard .....	194
#19 by Dino Pollard .....	204
#20 by Dino Pollard .....	215
#21 by Dino Pollard .....	222
#22 by Dino Pollard .....	229
#23 by Dino Pollard .....	237
#24 by Dino Pollard .....	246
#25 by Dino Pollard .....	253
#26 by Dino Pollard .....	261
#27 by Dino Pollard .....	270



---

# THE PARTING OF WAYS

## *Part I: Resignation*

by **David Wheatley**

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**

"You can't quit SHIELD!"

Pete Wisdom, looked Fury in the eye, smiled, and lit up a cigarette. "Watch me." As he spoke he reached in to his pocket and threw his badge down on the desk of the recently restored SHIELD Director. "I've had enough. The Shadow King, Abyss, Mjnari. Bollocks to it all, I'm walking."



**Lydia  
Del Ruiz**

"Pete, when I first approached you it was so you could make a difference, to bring an official mutant presence in to SHIELD and integrate you," Fury was imploring him. "We can't afford to lose that."



**Theresa  
Rourke**

"We had it," said Wisdom. "The XSE project would have worked, and we both know that, mutants, superhumans and regular agents working together to police the various supervillains and their teams and other terrorists. The project was good, proposed by Brian using the Captain Britain Corps as the idea and X-Force as a model, but it went to hell. Maybe if Forge, or you, or anyone with an amount of vision had done it, we could have pulled it off, but it's gone. The way it all went tits up means there's no way you can rebuild the project. The political will's gone."

"You turned it down," said Fury. "It needed you."



**David  
North**

"X-Force turned it down," Wisdom answered. "While you were in the hospital shouting hail to the king, with Forge allegedly dead, there was no way it was going to work. Not the way it should have done. Now look at what's left of X-Force - Lydia and Maverick have gone, Bishop and the rest are considering their options and aren't likely to stay. X-Force is dead, and that was my reason for being here. Therefore, I'm off." He sighed. "Nick, they've brought you back because they need stability here, and the whole damned organisation's under review. You don't even know what SHIELD's going to be like after the investigation, and the last time there was a scandal like this within SHIELD, the whole thing was shut down and rebuilt from



**Marcus  
Raven**



**Sarah  
Bane**

scratch. Bigger that. I'm held back - I can't take down Chapman, I can't take down Abyss, I can't... I can't do my job anymore, not through SHIELD."

The room was filled with silence. The original members of X-Force knew the identity of Abyss, Marcus had looked in to the minds of Kate and Pete and seen it was Vortigen Walker, but he and Theresa had promised to keep it secret. It wasn't that they didn't trust the newer team members, but they'd been down this road before. Even Fury didn't know, because the fewer people who knew the better, and the less chance of the man's name being spoken and killing whoever did it. Pete wasn't sure how that was going to work, because people would mention Walker's name and if they died, it would raise suspicions, so it had to be something to do with Abyss being Vortigen. It was just there was no way they could test it and it seemed to have no power on a telepathic level.

Pete had let the team know what he was doing, that he was leaving to figure things out, but he'd owed it to the original members, the people he had chosen for his team, to let them know why and as Fury looked at him, the SHIELD Director knew he wasn't going to convince the man that this was a mistake, because in many ways Wisdom was right. He also knew he was hiding something, but Fury knew it would come out at some point and he still had a few cards left to play. "At least think it over," he said. "Take some time off. A leave of absence, sort out what happened with Abyss in your mind, and come back..."

"Nah," said Pete as he shook his head. "What we've become these days isn't what I signed up for. To turn it back would be a challenge, I get that, but there's a taint and SHIELD's limited. With the review going on, we have to play things by the book. Abyss said I'd no chance of finding the bastard and he believes it. Why? Because there are rules..."

Fury snorted in derision. "Because you always play by them?"

"Don't start. I'm tired, Nick, tired and I need to figure out what's next. I just know... it's not this."

"You're not quitting then," said Fury. "I'll assign you to indefinite leave of absence, and have you as a reserve member."

Pete was on his feet in a moment. "No bloody chance."

"No bloody choice." Fury looked at him. "You're a great many things, including a pain in the neck but while you might be a vindictive, British sod with no regard for the chain of command or the idea that there are some things should be left well alone,

but you're one of the best agents we've had. I'm not going to lose you. And if you don't come when we call, I can have you arrested."

"You know that won't happen," Pete snorted, knowing Fury was kidding. Mostly. "I'm going home, catch up with some friends, and see if I can make a new start. I'm going to find Abyss and it won't happen while I'm here. Just do me a favour."

"Which is?"

"After they've stopped pissing about with inquiries and investigations, make SHIELD great again." Wisdom shook Fury's hand. "I'll see you around, Nick."

Then Wisdom turned and walked out of the office, both men knowing that he wouldn't be back and Fury brought up the X-Force file and ordered it suspended until further notice. He'd been under pressure to place the team under review anyway, and he couldn't fight it anymore. He'd let the team know what was going on and put them all on a leave of absence until further notice, citing the review, until he figured out what to do next. The political reputation of the X-Force project was in tatters, but maybe reassigning the remaining agents to work within other SHIELD teams would work better. They were good agents and having some power in the various teams would be useful. Shadowcat would be a useful addition to their tech division, Bishop and Shard could work in the law enforcement divisions, the others moved elsewhere. They'd all proven themselves as dedicated SHIELD agents, so there was very little bias towards them.

Wisdom was right though, there were too many investigations at the moment in to the future of SHIELD, but there was one thing going on that he still had control over. It was something that both he and Forge had become concerned with during their 'absence' SHIELD and as former Director's, if both of them had reservations about this very powerful organisation then there was certainly something amiss. They'd come from relatively nowhere to gain a lot of influence, both politically and financially. However with the reviews and such, there were other matters that demanded their attention, so there was only one man they'd both trusted to get to the bottom of the mystery that was the Byron Agency, and he'd been working on it a while. He picked up the phone.

"Mary, get me GW Bridge. I want to know how his investigation is going..."

---

The agent approached the head of special operations, known only as Irishman. He'd had many names, aliases, but this one suited. "Union Flag's escaped. She entered the CoffeeHouse and obtained certain files."

The Irishman's eyes narrowed. "Anything that connects up to us?"

"No, sir. The CoffeeHouse has been clear of anything that relates to ourselves, however she did get many files relating to the formation of Black Air."

"I see. How did she get on to us?"

"We're not sure, sir. We know of her powers of enhanced sensory perceptions, maybe she was able to detect us. We thought we had it covered, but we're checking to find out what we missed."

"I want that report on my desk first thing." He turned away but the agent was still there. "There's something else?"

"Paris, sir. He's getting close. What do you want us to do? We're not ready."

The Irishman closed his eyes. "He's like a dog with a bone." He considered for a moment, and then made the decision. He knew what needed to be done. "Deal with it, and make it look like an accident."

---

Colonel George Washington Bridge, formerly commander of the United Nations team Excalibur and now SHIELD Special Investigator, had followed the trail to Paris. The Byron Agency were slippery, but there was a trail and he'd followed it as best he could. He'd been looking in to things not too long after he'd left Excalibur, and what he'd found out he'd not liked.

He knew the former X-Man Banshee worked for the Agency, and that he had a pretty high security clearance, so high that Bridge hadn't been able to approach him without an appointment and, apparently, Mr Cassidy was booked until the end of the month, but if a slot opened up, he'd be more than happy to talk with Bridge. If only this was a formal SHIELD investigation, Bridge had thought, but there was a need for secrecy. The Byron Agency was well connected and it would certainly cause problems during the review.

However, he didn't need Banshee to check out the history of the Byron Agency but they had appeared from almost out of nowhere. They appeared to be a conglomerate of likeminded individuals who had banded together to promote peace and financial responsibility through their business and political interests, however they were present in a lot of countries political climate, including the big players - America, Great Britain, Russia, Japan, France, Germany, Europe, China. They had appeared perhaps ten years ago and had built themselves up so now their influence was far reaching. Yet they were clean. Very clean. No skeletons, no deep secrets and Bridge knew Fury and Forge were on the money. Nobody was this clean and the trail had brought him to Paris. This was where the first recorded appearance of the Agency was, or rather the first use of their influence. Somehow, they had been able to put a halt to strike action by the French truck drivers, which had almost brought Europe to a standstill. It was no small feat to pull that off, and now Bridge was looking for Gerrard L'Artois, the man who had made it happen, which was why he was in Paris. L'Artois had an apartment on the Seine, according to SHIELD records, which he'd accessed at the local sub-office.

"George Washington Bridge?" someone asked and GW looked up. The man looked familiar but before Bridge could say anything, someone grabbed him from behind in a chokehold and then he felt a knife slice in to him. The knifeman lifted it and twisted and Bridge felt his legs go numb. He'd been distracted by someone and taken from behind. "Good, we'd hate to have killed the wrong man..." The knifeman let go of Bridge, who was unable to stand, and he assumed the knife had cut in to his spinal cord. Without support, he dropped to the floor.

"Cowards," he said, looking at them. "You'd better hope they never find me, you'll bring a whole lot of trouble on yourselves."

"SHIELD's time is over," said the familiar man. "There are new players now, and we seek to control, to act, not react. Your tiger no longer has it's teeth." Then the man pushed at Bridge with his foot, casting the man in to the Seine. "Bye, GW, been real."

"You knew him?" the knifeman asked and the other nodded.

"He used to be my boss..."

---

After leaving SHIELD, Wisdom went for a short holiday, stopping in the little Cornish village of St Ives. He stayed there

for a few days, resting and making plans. Then he returned home and made calls to his various contacts. This wasn't like the last time he was unemployed, people returned his calls and while he never said he was still in SHIELD he let them assume it and they made things happen. There were a great many things he'd needed to do, to find out. WHO were looking in to what had happened after the Jaspers affair, seeing if there was anything that had been missed. He'd also spoken with Brian to see what was happening on Otherworld. The five Proud Walkers upping and leaving and becoming forces of evil would be something that would have created a great stir. He also did what he could to find out if his sister was back. He was going to find Walker, and he was going to kill him. What Black Air had done to him would seem like a picnic by the time he'd was through with him.

"You can mess with me, you can ruin my life, you can even kill me, but you do not touch my family," he said. Then he heard a key turn and he turned to the door as a young woman stepped through and he glared at her in anger. "What the bloody hell are you doing in my apartment?"

"Pete?" she said in surprise.

"Sarah." He'd not seen her in ages

"This is awkward." He nodded and there was silence

"When did I give you a key?" he asked

"You didn't." She looked sheepish.

"Didn't think so." He sighed. "What's going on, Sarah?"

"I'm in trouble. People are looking for me."

"What did you steal this time?"

Sarah Bane was a former agent of Black Air, Pete's mentor and trainer. She was his oldest friend, and one of the few agents of Black Air who hadn't wanted to kill him after he quit. Not that there were many left these days, Black Air was a faded relic, which was why Sarah had become the premier cat burglar in the UK, known as the Union Flag because she left a little calling card. She was cocky because she was good, and she was one of the few people who could get under his skin. She was exactly like him in attitude, and there was never enough room on the planet for both of them.

"Insurance," she said. "There were people after me, and I thought they were Black Air, so I broke in to the CoffeeHouse

and gathered some protection. Then they really started to come after me."

"So you're staying here?"

"Black Air won't go after SHIELD." Pete shook his head.

"Small flaw in the plan, Sar. I'm not SHIELD anymore. I quit."

Sarah sighed. "I can't leave you alone for five minutes. If you're not SHIELD..."

"Being here's no bloody good." He shrugged. "However I was going out. You can tag along if you like."

"Okay, I guess Where are we going?"

He smiled. "Westminster. And on the way I'll explain what's happened."

---

In Paris, the police dragged a body of a man from the waters of the Seine. Chief Inspector Gerard hated things like this, as it would affect tourism and then the mayor would be on to him about finding the murderer.

The forensic doctor at the scene was examining the body to confirm death and then they pulled his wallet out of the man's pocket. "MONSIEUR!" he shouted towards Gerard and Gerard went over and as soon as he saw the badge he knew this was no longer his case.

He would have to inform SHIELD that one of their agents had been killed.

---

"So let me get this right," Sarah said, as they arrived at the office of the member of Parliament for Critchley East. "Your team got a load of new people added to it, Kate miscarried a baby that may or may not have been yours, you got the hell beaten out of you, then Lydia dumped you and took off with Maverick to find her family."

Wisdom nodded.

"Genesis turned out to be Mjnari, a villain called Abyss captured you and Kate, tormented you by showing you your resurrected sister leading the fabled Proud Walkers of Otherworld and then,

and only then, did you go 'bugger this, I quit?'"

"Yeah," said Wisdom. "After everything that went down with the Shadow King and the rest, I've had enough of being used as a punching bag by every villain who takes a dislike to me."

"Remind why you thought joining SHIELD was a good idea?"

"I was bored and broke," he answered. "But it was the best thing I did and quitting X-Force was a hard call, but I have to fly solo for a while, and settle some old scores. And new ones."

Sarah sighed. "After what Black Air did to Vortigen, I'm not surprised the Proud Walkers went bad."

"It was nothing compared to what we did to him," Pete muttered.

"What was that?" Sarah said, but Pete stayed silent. He knocked on the door and entered the office, to be greeted by Feron.

"Is he in?" Pete asked and Feron nodded and showed him in. "Brian!" he said shaking the man's hand. "Sarah, may I introduce Brian Braddock, Member of Parliament for Critchley East. Brian, this is Sarah Bane."

"Pleasure," said Brian. "I managed to get in touch with Roma," he said. "The Walkers haven't been seen on Otherworld since they left to build New Camelot with Vortigen at the end of the war with Necromon. There's been no sign of Romany either, so whatever Abyss has done to her, she's not who she used to be. However, Feron's an adept and he knows there's a dark mystical force out there. It may not even be the Proud Walkers, just twisted shades created by Abyss. I wonder why he didn't create a copy of Vortigen though?" Pete said nothing for a moment.

"Brian, we know what happened to him," said Pete and Brian looked uncomfortable. He remember Vortigen's fall from grace. "I should tell you that Sarah was Black Air. She knows what happened to Vortigen as well as we do. We helped set it up."

"But it doesn't track," said Sarah. "Where was Vortigen? If the other Walkers have been pulled up why not him? If they are the true Walkers, they must have him, and if they're twisted shades, then they why... "

"I don't know," Pete said, irritably, wanting to scream that it was Vortigen behind it all, that he was Abyss, but the block that had been put on him by the villain stopped him from doing so.

"If I could tell you, I would, but I can't." There was silence in the room.

"I can't believe what you did to him," said Brian after a moment. "He didn't deserve what you did to him."

"No," Sarah said. "None of them ever did, but we did it anyway. We removed a greater threat, as after the collapse of the energy matrix after the Necrom affair, he was the only Walker to return to Earth, the others content to stay on Otherworld and aid Merlyn in his plans. Black Air existed before they managed to take over things, and they were waiting for him and his ilk to return. We had the means to break him, a task made easier by the serious lack of focused mystical power to call on."

Brian shook his head. "You made him in to that monster, put him on the television, ruined him."

Sarah nodded. "Yes, we framed him, and we did it good. Made him in to a murdering child molester, faked the evidence and let things take their course. Six little girls, under tens and we put his face on every billboard in the country. He was arrested trying to escape and they caught him in a hail of bullets. Walkers are hard to kill though, so the bullets took him out of action, and his own words ensured everyone thought he was mad. While he was locked in an insane asylum that we ran, we made sure he was drugged so he couldn't do anything about it. The things we used... Science and magic, it shattered his mind and by the time he recovered Excalibur had destroyed the energy matrix that was around the United Kingdom and his powers were lessened. However there were other like-minded individuals, who knew what we'd done to him, because we'd ruined them as well. Joseph Chapman, Samantha Hasard..."

"They all became part of the Hellfire Club, protected by the Club, using it for anonymity. Sebastian Shaw needed a lot of resources in his fight against the X-Men, and other and Chapman knew that the HFC and Black Air go way back, sharing similar goals," Pete said. "They used their influence and got him out, and we owe them a favour. But the first thing they did when Black Air fell was to form a new Inner Circle and ensure that their former enemies would never rise again. Problem was by the time Black Air had done with them, they didn't care what they did to make amends."

"Except Vortigen. He was the only sane one of the lot," Brian answered. "At least in my dealings with him."

"He was still a Proud Walker," Pete replied. "He was disgraced

"Black Air's gone," said Sarah, "however there are those who

still have allegiance to the Hierarchy, and they don't like traitors."

"So we know," said Brian, having witnessed the wrath of the remnants of Black Air before.

"Sarah thinks that they're after her," said Pete. "It's why she's hanging out with me."

"Yeah, because that makes sense," Brian muttered. "Pete, I don't know what more you want. I'm only just getting used to my new powers. I'm not ready to be Captain Britain again, not yet. I can't help you fight Abyss."

"Not asking you to," said Pete, holding his hands. "I'm after friends who know things, and you're a friend who knows things. It's not your fight, Brian, but you've got contacts."

"Not as many as I did," said Brian. "Remember, the XSE was proposed by me, and I'm still feeling the political fall-out of the failure." Pete closed his eyes. He'd forgotten that had happened. "I'll do what I can, though. You may be an annoying sod at the best of times, but you're still my friend." Then the telephone rang and he picked up. "Braddock. Just a moment." He looked at Pete. "It's for you."

Pete shrugged and took the receiver. "Hello? Nick?! How did you know I was... Never mind. What? When? No don't, I'm not, Nick? NICK!" He put the receiver down. "Bastard."

"What?" asked Sarah.

"He just drafted me," Wisdom scowled. "I'm going to Paris, to investigate a murder."

"Murder? Surely that's a job for the French authorities," Brian said, not sure of what was going on. "It's nothing to do with SHIELD."

Pete looked at him. "It is when the victim is former SHIELD Director George Washington Bridge."

---



---

# THE PARTING OF WAYS

## *Part II: Ghosts*

by **David Wheatley**

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**

"George Washington Bridge was killed in a mugging," Fury said to Wisdom as they walked down the banks of the Seine.

"Problem is I can't investigate it too much, which is why I've called you in." He blew cigar smoke in to the air. "This isn't a SHIELD operation."

"Walking with me's a bad move then," Wisdom said, matching the smoke of the cigar with that of a cigarette.

"You quit, remember? I'm here collecting the body of a friend. Find out what happened, Pete."



**Lydia  
Del Ruiz**

"Why can't SHIELD get in to this?" Fury looked about and moved in closer, speaking in an almost whisper.

"He was investigating the Byron Agency, unofficially." Wisdom nodded. The Agency had a big voice, especially in the areas that SHIELD needed to keep their noses clear while the system was under review. "The official line is he was mugged, resisted and was stabbed by another assailant. The coroner confirms it and we've no evidence to say otherwise. France has been a bit overwhelmed with this kind of thing since the Avatars attacked. I just don't believe it went down like they say."



**Theresa  
Rourke**

"And I owe you a favour?" Fury gave a slight nod. "Guess I'm on my own too? X-Force..."

"I disbanded it after you quit, pending the review. There is no X-Force, not any more."



**David  
North**

"Figures." Wisdom flicked his tab in to the waters of the river. "I'll sort it."

"One other thing," Fury said. "You might want to look up an old friend or two, while you're here."

"I don't know anyone in Paris," Wisdom started, and then he remembered. "Oh yeah..." Fury however had faded in to the



**Marcus  
Raven**



**Sarah  
Bane**

shadows and Wisdom pulled out his cell. "Sarah, it's me. I'm on my way back to the hotel. What? I'll let you know when I get back. Let's just say we're going to go and find some more friends of mine."

---

"This isn't good," Lydia Del Ruiz said as she strained at the chains that fastened her in the cell. They didn't move an inch. "David, any luck?"

David North shrugged. He was in the same boat, in a cell at the other side of her and they could just about see each other through a small window. "You know we're never going to live this down, if they find us?"

"If they're looking for us," said Lydia. "But I hope someone is."

Not so long ago, Lydia had quit SHIELD and X-Force and headed to Paris to find her family, to see what had happened in the aftermath of the Avatar attacks. She and Pete had been having difficulties because of his relationship with Kitty, or Kate, or whatever name she was going by at the moment and it had been easy to walk away. Maverick had joined her because he too was having difficulties in dealing with Kitty and Pete. The miscarriage hadn't helped, but she would have aborted it anyway and while he'd been supportive and understanding, he'd realised she was never going to feel for him the way he felt for her, so he'd tagged along. However, it wasn't long after they got to Paris that their troubles started.

The place where Lydia's family had supposedly been was gone, gone as if it had never existed. There was no trace of the house, or of there ever being one there. This wasn't part of what had happened, it had simply been taken away and Lydia had felt a chill go down her. North was a bit more cynical about things and had seen operations before where whole cities had been faked - yes, it took money and manpower, but it was doable and there was an old familiar feeling to it. Afterwards they spent a great deal of time asking what had happened, but nobody had answers or even remembered Lydia's family. It was certainly suspicious, but there was nothing they could do, nothing they could find. Lydia was a trained detective, but there were no clues, not pattern. Maverick was an ex-spook and had seen a lot, but even he was close to calling in help. The one thing they hadn't wanted to do was call in X-Force, but it was looking like they had no choice until they found a coin

It had been left half embedded in the mud. Maverick's faceplate scanners had noticed it and, on further examination, it wasn't a French coin or a Euro. It was a Japanese Yen. There had been

no explanation for that being here at all, other than someone had dropped it, but before they'd had chance to do anything, six black clad agents had appeared as if from nowhere and attacked them. It was swift and well executed and the former SHIELD agents hadn't lasted too long, even though they'd done some damage themselves. When they had come around they had found themselves in here. A guard brought them meals and their chains would be loosened to allow them to eat, but not to get too far away. They'd been here three or four weeks now, but it felt longer. Much longer and in truth they were guessing how long they'd been there.

Every other day they were hosed down, to clear off the bodily wastes and stench. Their clothing was down to rags, and they were a mess, Maverick's missing eye causing him pain, due to an infection of some kind, but it was as if they were being kept alive simply for the sake of keeping them alive. Nobody asked them questions, nobody came in to other than to feed them and clean them with a pressure hose. There was no sense of time down here, no sense of anything other than the two of them, trapped in separate cells.

"Lydia..." he said.

"Don't," she answered, knowing what they were going to talk about. They'd had this chat before.

"We've been down here a long time, and not once have you mentioned him."

"I'm not listening," she snapped. "I'm not."

"Neither of us have our powers," he said. "Our energy reserves are too low. Marcus isn't powerful enough to pick us up from here, even if he was listening. It's good odds that we're going to be here a long time, maybe a lifetime. Why did you leave Pete?"

"Because he didn't love me, all right?" she said, her voice was bitter and ragged. "He only ever loved her. That was all that mattered to him." The silence echoed all around them. "If it didn't, he'd have come after us, after me. He didn't. He doesn't even know we're missing."

---

"Okay, this is weird," said Pete as he and Sarah looked at where Lydia's family had reportedly been.

"So what was the deal between the two of you?" she asked as she rested, leant back on the car.

"I fell in love with her, and Kitty Prdye kept getting in the way. She had enough and took off." He looked at her. "Don't look at me like that, Sar."

"Kitty bloody Pryde. You quit Black Air for her, the vapid piece of jail-bait. Any woman would look good in the tight spandex things she used to wear. 'I used to be an X-Man, I'm so wonderful'. What the hell did you see in her?"

"I think the spandex told it all," said Pete. "That and she saved my life a few times."

"Hell of a reward you gave her. I tell you what, it's a bloody good job she was past the age of consent. What you two were up to would have been illegal most places."

"It's not like she didn't know what she was doing," he muttered. "Sex ed seemed to be a big thing at Xavier's, from all accounts. Anyway, she dumped me."

"Kitty or Lydia?"

He glared at her in frustration. There weren't many people who could push his buttons like this. "Both, do you mind? I'm trying to figure out what's going on here and you're sniping about Kitty...."

"Open you eyes, think basic training, you berk," Sarah said, calmly, still the mentor to the student. "It's not that long ago. Look around."

"What do you mean?" he said and she nodded in the direction of the trees in the distance. Two tall trees were bent, angled behind a small one and looked like something. "Rabbit's Ears. What the hell are they doing here, I though they were in Dorset?"

"Training bases across the world," Sarah said. "Unless it's an amazing coincidence, the Rabbit's Ears are a good sign that this was a Black Air safehouse."

"Lydia's aunt was Black Air?" he said. "That makes no sense. Unless..."

"This is a Black Air op," said Sarah. "I know the hallmarks, but for it to happen in such a short space of time... Black Air are active, Pete. I told you they were after me." Pete shook his head.

"I made sure of it myself. Black Air was ruined, and...I might

have maybe used SHIELD resources to keep them gone."

"Then someone's built them back up from the ashes," said Sarah. "Black Air is back, and they've got your friends. I think you pissed them off."

"Oh, bollocks," Pete sighed. "So much for time off."

"What's the plan then?" Sarah said, taking a cigarette out, which Pete swiped from her and she took out another.

"Why do I have to have the plan?" he asked as he lit it.

She shrugged. "Because."

"Fine, we're heading back to Paris. I've a little job for you."

"What?"

"Breaking in to police headquarters, stealing all the files they have on GW Bridge's murder, and meeting me back at the hotel."

She raised an eyebrow. "And you're going to be doing what?" He smiled and blew smoke in to the air.

"What I do best. I'm going to shake the tree a little and see what falls out."

---

Sean Cassidy sighed. Recent events involving the X-Men had not been easy for him, but he'd done what was needed, what he had to do. The Agency had managed to take copies of the Xavier Protocols, even if they couldn't crack the codes, and he knew that the data was incomplete, fragmented. It would provide clues, not solutions, and until they broke the encryptions they had no clue as to what the clues could be. The Agency had figured that there may be security back-ups that erased the data in case of a failed hack. Banshee had worked with Forge long enough to know how sneaky the man could be. However things had worked rather well. The X-Men thought they had recovered the Protocols, they had no leads on the Agency, and aside from the fact they knew he was now opposed to them and what they did, and the fact they had lost the X-Men they'd held captive, it had been a rather good success, aside from being taken down with relative ease - a valid reason for why they needed to recover the Protocols and file them away with the other special information they had gathered over the years. Other technicians were working on the Protocols now

and they would find the secrets out eventually. The only real failing was the situation with Helena Weaver, however the Hierarchy were not concerned, for there were always ways and for now they needed him to do what he did best - solve problems. Government no longer truly governed, business no longer worked at solving the problems of the world, armies were ineffective in this new global environment. That was where the Byron Agency came in, slowly working, manipulating and controlling things to ensure that things did not get out of hand, or if they did they would step in and take control, but that would only happen if they failed to stop things getting that far.

It involved making hard choices, removing people from the field of play, sometimes permanently. Once he would have found that a problem, but Sean had grown colder, harder, over the last few years and the Byron Agency had offered him a chance to make some real changes. While it was not necessarily true, the heroes of the world were no longer in control either. The X-Men had never been the same since the death of Xavier, rolling from one extra-ordinary crisis to the next. Apocalypse, then the Shadow King, then Apollyon... Such large scale conflicts and while their foes had been defeated, the Agency had to wonder what kind of toll it was taking on them. Then you had the Avengers, shades of their former selves - where was the heroics that had gone on when Captain America, Iron Man, Giant Man, Scarlet Witch, Thor and the rest of what could be considered to be Earth's Mightiest Heroes? The new breed were fine Avengers, perfect perhaps for this era, but not of the calibre of their predecessors. The Fantastic Four endured as always, but they had gone through such changes. Reed had been incapacitated and while he was recovering there were still upheavals. The groups that everyone looked to were not what they were. Heroes changed allegiances, slipping to the dark side, no wonder people were afraid. Even SHIELD had fallen from grace, and was now in the hands of the puppet masters of the United Nations, and all the while, the darker underbelly of society went untouched. The theory behind Excalibur was good, but the practice flawed, Alpha Flight concerned themselves with Canadian matters, and where did Canada fit in the attention of the world? Sean knew the truth - there were no heroes anymore, the heroic age had passed them by leaving this dark age of fear, of hatred, of suspicion. He would not allow that. The Byron Agency would not allow that, and they would maintain order by whatever means needed. They needed to be strong for when the line eventually fell and the Byron Agency would pick up the pieces. Sean sighed, thinking that his recent actions were also more in line with those of a villain than a hero.

The Irishman regretted the death of Bridge, but the truth of the Byron Agency would help nobody. They had worked long and hard to get to the position they were in, and to have it all

revealed now was not an option. Not until after... He smiled and shook his head. He still allowed himself moments of weakness. That's why he hadn't had the two former X-Force agents killed. He'd keep them alive, but no more than that, out of respect for Terry. They were her friends, and he didn't want to cause her any more pain. Plus their deaths would bring more trouble than it was worth, but not from their former employers. Steps had been taken to remove SHIELD as a threat.

"Sir," said one of his operatives. "We have a problem." He looked at him, the glance saying 'go on' better than words. "Wisdom is in Paris. He's investigating Bridge's death, aside from the SHIELD investigation."

"I didn't think they knew each other," Sean mused. "I don't remember reading that they had come face to face in the meetings between X-Force and Excalibur." He shrugged it off. "Doesn't matter, he won't be able to prove anything. We sorted it all out."

"Yes sir, but there's something else - he's also investigating the disappearance of Del Ruiz and North." Cassidy clenched his fist. A conflict with Wisdom had been inevitable, but he was in danger of making a nuisance.

"Ready my jet, I'll see to this personally." He would call the Hierarchy and let them know that they would have to take measures sooner rather than later. Wisdom was just one man - he couldn't take on the Byron Agency and thanks to this review, SHIELD would have no jurisdiction over them and he knew he would have no small amount of pleasure informing them of that, but first he had to deal with Wisdom. If he wanted to see his friends that badly, they could certainly arrange that.

In fact, Fury was in Paris claiming Bridge's body and Sean knew that he could kill two birds with one stone.

---

Wisdom knew of only one Black Air base of operations in Paris, and that had long since been closed, allegedly. However if Sarah was right, and there was no real reason she wasn't, then someone had taken over from Black Air, continuing where they had left off and Pete wasn't amused. He wasn't surprised he'd missed it, given the amount of people who thought capturing him and trying to brainwash him was a good idea, but he'd have thought he'd have seen something. There was no doubt about it, really, he was getting older and maybe he wasn't quite as on top of his game as he'd used to be.

However, he was also a man on a mission. He still loved Lydia

and he'd not treated her right, he knew that. Kitty's pregnancy had messed with him and stirred up feelings he'd thought he had moved past. Lydia had left him, there wasn't much more to say than that, but he was damned if anyone else was going to use the people he cared about against him. First Romany, now Lydia.

"No more," he promised as he entered the small bar, formerly run by Monsieur Alfonse, and his name was still over the door. It was a good sign that this was still Black Air based. It was a seedy dive, but he also knew that underneath it, through the cellars, there had been a rather hi-tech operation. He cautiously approached the bar, knowing that if they were watching they'd know he was here. "Bonjour, Monsieur. Je cherche Ernest Leclerc."

"Non." The man looked away.

"The hard way, then," Pete said, ditching the dodgy language skills, and he grabbed the man and rammed his face in to the bar three times. "Ernest Leclerc, or his successor. Now." There was some movement behind him and he moved just out of the way as a chair was swung at him, catching the barman as it swung and Wisdom used the momentum of the swing to throw the attacked over the bar as well. There were four others, ready and waiting for him and he cracked his knuckles. Now he was having fun.

---

Sarah was at their hotel when Pete sauntered through the door in to her room, his coat slung over his shoulder and a very relaxed aura surrounded him, signified by the wide grin.

"Someone had a good time," she said and he nodded. "Who'd you kill?"

"Didn't kill anyone," he said, flopping down on the bed. "But I got a damn good workout."

"Alfonse's?" He nodded. "Was he there?" He shook his head. "Why the grin?"

"Because I just beat up six former Black Air agents, used their security clearance to get in to the basement and downloaded their files pertaining to Paris operations in the last year."

"Year?" she said.

"I'd have got more, but it wasn't the Black Air mainframe," he

said. "At least not the one I knew. I could only get summaries, but they've been very busy, from the look of it too." Then he looked at her. "How'd you do?"

"Bridge was murdered," she said, "but not in a mugging. The injury's not consistent. However the investigation was halted by the Interior Minister himself."

He sat up. "Really? That's interesting, he's not supposed to do that. It's outside the remit of the Ministry. It say why?"

She shook her head. "Had to dig a lot to find that. We're going to have to break in the Ministry if we want to find out more."

Pete's relaxed aura was pretty much gone now. "This is getting serious," he said. "I can see why SHIELD couldn't get involved, even if they'd wanted to. First things first though, we're heading for Lyons."

"Lyons? Why?"

"Because that's where the Black Air's detention area is. If we're breaking in to a French government office, we're going to need help."

---

The next morning they headed out of Paris towards Lyons, neither of them noticing that they were being watched from the roof of their hotel.

"Targets are moving out," he reported.

"Good," said the Irishman, from the comfort of the Byron Agency offices. "We may not have been able to stop him getting the files, but we limited his access. Good work" Sean hung up as he looked out of the window, towards the Eiffel Tower in the distance and he pressed another button, putting him through to the Detention facilities. "Wisdom and Bane are on their way, so make sure both of them get the welcome they deserve. They're probably expecting trouble, so try not to kill them, if you can help it. I'll be on my way as soon as I've spoken with the SHIELD Director."

"Yes sir," came the reply, but Sean had hung up before the sentence was finished and he took a sip of the coffee on his desk, then he straightened his tie and headed towards the door, feeling a little sorry for the two people heading right where he wanted them to be, but it wasn't personal.





---

# THE PARTING OF WAYS

## Part III: Allegiances

by David Wheatley

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**

"You know they know we're coming."

"Yeah, I know they know we're coming."

Sarah sighed. "So if you know they know, surely they know that too."

"I know." Wisdom smiled. "You remember the Lucia op? I was thinking that would go down well this time too"



**Lydia  
Del Ruiz**

"You're going to get us killed." He shrugged. "What ever happened to subtle? I taught you 'low profile', and you're good at it. Don't draw attention to yourself, don't get noticed."

"I found that I really like blowing things up," Pete answered. "And I'm quite good at it too."

"You hide behind that glib façade, like a little boy playing at being a grown up," Sarah said. "Does it fool anyone?"



**Theresa  
Rourke**

"You'd be surprised," Pete answered. "By the way, did you tick the box for full insurance on the car?" Sarah closed her eyes, wondering how she'd ever gotten hooked up with him. He wasn't the black ops agent, the one who could just appear behind you, the one who'd have snapped your neck like a twig if he had to. It wasn't that he'd gotten soft, in some ways he'd grown harder, almost colder, she could see that things hadn't been easy for him, but at the same time he was also enjoying what he could do. He wasn't as restrained anymore, as if he'd let his sense of humour have a larger reign. Perhaps it was that, or he surrendered to the grief and sadness that lay behind his eyes.

"What did they do to you?" she said, barely a whisper and if he heard he didn't make any reaction.



**David  
North**

"Lyon, 10 miles," he said. "Wonder why we add an s to it in translation? Oh well, we're almost there."



**Marcus  
Raven**



**Sarah  
Bane**

"Where did you say the detention area was again?" Sarah asked.

"Below the Archaeological Park of Fourvière, there's a secret passage under the amphitheatre. Apparently Black Air founded some of the archaeological digs, and had a special place built." He looked at her. "There is one small problem though."

"You mean we're not far from the Interpol headquarters?" He nodded. "An international police force, and you're going to start blowing up a landmark?" He nodded again. "I'm not enamoured of this plan." He nodded a third time. "You're going to use Interpol aren't you?" He grinned. "You're hoping Lydia will sort it, as she was one of them and seeing as we're rescuing a former agent they'll look the other way?"

"Welcome to my world," he said. "Buckle up."

"Oh bloody hell..."

---

"Colonel Fury, a moment of your time." Fury turned to look at the former X-Man known as Banshee. He knew that Sean Cassidy now worked for the Byron Agency, and that whatever had happened to him that had caused him to go from the tutor of the next generation of mutant heroes to a special agency with the Agency had to have been a major shift. He'd heard rumours too, that the Byron Agency and the X-Men had been involved in a bit of a throw down and the Agency had lost. Now Cassidy was here in the SHIELD field office in Paris, where Fury was filling in the paperwork to release Bridge's body.

"Mr Cassidy," the SHIELD Director said. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm here on behalf the Byron Agency," he started and Fury's eyes narrowed slightly. "You're going to be getting word from the UN in a little while, but you'll be halting any investigations in to the Agency, effective immediately."

"You can't..." Fury started but Sean hadn't finished talking and he was more than capable of making himself heard.

"Please, Colonel, SHIELD's become rather an embarrassment over the last year or so and whilst you, and certain aspects, have worked hard to route out the cancerous parts of the organisation, there's still lots to be done. Funding, for example, is a very contentious issue."

"Funding's provided by the United Nations," Fury said.  
"SHIELD's charter..."

"Is being reviewed, along with everyone and everything else," Cassidy replied. "However you're going to learn that the funding has been devolved from the UN and will be provided a consortium of businesses, all of whom are members of the International Chamber of Commerce, a significant proportion of whom are part of the Byron Agency family."

"You can't be serious," Fury said, fighting back the anger. "You bought us?"

"No," said Sean, "SHIELD cannot be bought however it does need to be overseen with a more business like approach. International terrorism is no longer limited to blowing up buildings, there are examples of economic terrorism, technological terrorism, cyber terrorism and the business community feel's it's the duty of the ICC to take a more active role, in partnership with the United Nations, of course."

"And investigating the companies that fund it would be a very serious issue," said Fury.

"Nobody is saying don't look in to us, however probing too deeply could create ripples that would bite in to the funding of SHIELD. Or it's... staffing." Fury was livid, the man was threatening the very existence of SHIELD, the impartiality of SHIELD.

"I'm going to fight this," he said, going toe to toe with Cassidy, each staring the other in the eye. "I'll go straight to Geneva, it's not like we're far, and then if that fails I'll head for New York. You won't do this without I fight, I promise you."

"You'll lose," said the Irishman with every bit of the same collected cool he had entered with, the difference between the two men evident. "Nothing personal, Commander, it's just business after all." He turned to leave and then turned back. "I was sorry to hear about Colonel Bridge. I know how highly people thought of him." Fury clenched his fist in anger, but did nothing.

"This isn't over," he said and Sean smiled.

"Yes, it is." Then he walked away, leaving Fury to find a telephone. He couldn't let this stand. There had to be something he could do to stop this and bring the Byron Agency down. They were rotten, he could feel it, but he needed proof and he hoped that Wisdom managed to find something.

---

"Everything's a lie, and we're all gonna die, before we say goodbye, let's attack," Wisdom was quietly singing to himself. So far he had clocked seven agents all dressed as tourists, but they were watching and waiting. For a moment, Wisdom paused, wishing he had his team with him, but he'd played this game without them for long enough. The entrance to the lower catacombs was through the main office but getting there was going to be like running a gauntlet. However, it was game time. He pressed the button on the remote and not far from the main entrance was a major explosion, as their hire car exploded. Sarah should have kept the area clear so nobody got hurt, but he wanted chaos. Was it the Avatars, was it Al-Qaeda, was it something else? People were running, scattering as smoke billowed in the sky and he made his way to the office.

"Hi," he said to the man on duty and the agent looked shocked, but it was only for a moment as Wisdom smashed him with an uppercut that sent him to the floor. He shook his head and opened the door, going in to the office, heading for a small locker at the back. There was a false back to it and he kicked it in to reveal the passageway to the lower levels, then he paused. This was too easy. There were no alarms, no sounds. "Damn," he said, as he waited for Sarah to catch up.

"What's wrong?"

"They're not distracted enough," he said. "Don't suppose you fancy taking your clothes off and wandering around down there?" She just looked at him. "Thought not. It's up to you then."

She nodded, remembering the photograph he had shown her of his two friends. It was down to her to use her skills and powers to find them and get them out, which left Wisdom to...

"What will you be doing?" He smiled.

"Making a noise. They want to catch me, I think I'll let them." Sarah sighed as he nonchalantly wandered off.

---

"It's him," said Cassidy as he surveyed the panic and destruction. "Peter bloody Wisdom." There were security agents appearing from all over and they weren't all his, and the problem with Interpol was they weren't going to do as he told them, and then he saw him, standing in the middle of the arena, smoking a cigarette. "Cocky little bastard," Sean said, and he spoke in to his communicator. "Get him, and find the

girl." He watched as his people headed out to get Wisdom but Wisdom was waiting for them and it turned in to a fist fight. There were too many people about to start using weapons and powers but Seam started to think that he might be able to use Interpol to clear the place. He just needed to contact the French Interior Minister and sort it. In the meantime, Wisdom was using the crowd to his advantage, taking out agents one at a time. He wasn't a classically trained fighter like Wolverine, or Shadowcat but there was a finesse to his brawling skills. He hit people and they stayed down, but where was Sarah Bane? She had to be going after Wisdom's friends, but why would they trust her? How would they know her?

He'd see to her personally and he headed off to the entrance to the offices. Let Wisdom play his little games, he'd have them both in the end.

---

Sarah Bane crept slowly through the catacombs, stretching her powers to their fullest extents. She had discovered long ago that she had heightened senses, impeccable hearing allowing her to hear a vague whisper from the other side of a sports field, a sense of smell on a par with that of any animal, a touch that allowed her to grip almost any surface and detect imperfections on it, sight like a hawk in even the brightest or darkest environments and a sense of taste that she could find even the merest hint of flavour on something. However it wasn't just that, she had an exceptional memory for things as well as an ability to see with the mind's eye. It wasn't a radar sense like Daredevil's, it was more a finely honed sense of perception. Illusions had no effect on her and she could see the spiritual plane of reality itself. She didn't just know if people were lying, she knew if the world itself was lying.

Her advanced sensory perceptions had made her one of the best agents of Black Air. She had trained herself to be silent in her movements, silent to herself so that only one with talents like her own would be able to find her, if even then. They would be able to hear her heart beating or detect her scent in the air, but there were a handful of people who could do that. There were many guards down here, but she had been able to hear their heartbeats and detect their scents and they had never even known she was there before she was upon them and disabled them. Sarah wasn't a killer, she wasn't an assassin like Pete or any of those like him - she was an agent, she got in, she got out. It was why she had trained them, it was how she was an exceptional thief. The Interpol offices knew the name of Union Flag well enough, because she liked to leave a calling card. She had hoped to be Union Jack, but the media had always seen him as a hero and so they had gone with the other

meaning.

Her touch allowed her to exert just the right amount of pressure on the agents who were down there to stop them dead, without killing them or allowing them to make a sound. She was that good.

She had no idea where she was going, other than following her nose as it were. There were two scents that lingered down here, stale body odour, not with the clinical sterility of the guards, or the mustiness of the dank corridors and she made her way down there, wondering what her partner and protégé was doing up top. Then she found what she was after, the holding area and inside were two figures, rags barely covering their modesty and they were not as clean as they would normally have been. She could hear them breathing and she knew they were alive but she also knew this place had to have cameras and such and they would have company soon enough.

"North, Del Ruiz," she said as she stepped in front of the cells, looking in and they looked at her. "I'm here to get you out." She looked at the cells, examining the locks. The guards around here had no keys, and she started feeling the bars for weak spots.

"Who are you?" said Maverick, his voice ragged.

"I'm Sarah Bane, I'm here with Pete."

"Other than the accent, how do we know you're legit?" Lydia asked.

"Because right now he's upstairs blowing up an French landmark." She looked at her. "He also says you have a crescent shaped birthmark on your inner right thigh, just below the crotch."

"I'll kill him," muttered Lydia, going red.

"So will I," said Sarah, thinking these bars were extremely well made. "I could do with his hot knives right about now." She pulled her lock picks from her belt. "Everyone be quiet a sec." She went to work, feeling the tremors in the picks as she worked the lock, waiting for the almost imperceptible clicks that would tell her she was on the right track. "Oh, I see," she muttered as she felt the tumblers move and the door to Lydia's cell opened. Sarah pulled out her gun and fired, shooting the chains that held her. "Sorry about that, but we're running out of time." Lydia nodded.

"Behind you," she said and Sarah nodded, kicking back, striking

one of the guards that had come down in the gut, but she knew was about to be out-numbered. Lydia was barely standing, her muscles weak from lack of use but she hauled herself to her feet and started swinging her chains, felling agents and giving Sarah chance to work on the lock to Maverick's cell. She was obviously taxing whatever solar energy remained in her body and the lock was soon opened. "I hope you've another miracle," Lydia said.

"Well I wouldn't call him a miracle, but Mr Wisdom does come in handy from time to time," Sarah said as she pointed her gun at Maverick's chains and fired. He dropped to his knees, and she went to help him up. "Are you okAAAAAAAARGH!" she grabbed hold of her head, covering her ears as a sonic scream echoed around. Lydia went to help her.

"Terry?" asked David, wondering if the rest of X-Force were here as well.

"No," said Sarah, obviously in a great deal of pain. "X-Force was disbanded when Pete quit SHIELD."

"Theresa doesn't even know you're here," said a voice and they looked to see Banshee standing there. "And if she did, she'd not be able to help you out."

"You're behind this?" said Maverick, in astonishment. "But you're an X-Man."

"The X-Men died the day Xavier did," Sean said. "Cyclops has never had the drive or instinct the Professor did. The original five would have to work together as a proper team to be anything close to the Professor, and they've not done that in a long time."

"You're insane," said Lydia, coming towards him but he released a sonic scream that slammed her back in to the wall.

"No, I just know sacrifices need to be made, and we'll take the knowledge both of you have soon enough. You're not ready yet."

"Knowledge?" said Maverick. "You'll get nothing from us," he spat at him.

"You're already out of fight," said Sean. "There's no heroes coming to the rescue and Wisdom alone won't be able to stop me."

"I'd like to find out for myself," said Wisdom, as he fired two hot knives, searing Cassidy's legs and dropping him. "If you

don't mind." Sean gave out a cry as he looked at Wisdom and Wisdom could feel his whole body shaking as the sonic energy struck him, beating on him. Sean wasn't trying to stop him, he was trying to incapacitate him. Pete could barely see, Sarah was being crippled by the sonic pitch and Lydia and North weren't in any shape to help. Pete couldn't focus properly to fire his hot knives and take Cassidy out once and for all but then he had a thought. "LYD!"

He fired his hot knives as wide as he could, knowing he had no chance and he watched as the sonic scream dissipated them, but the solar radiation they produced was being cast in to the air and he kept them coming and coming and coming, hot knives against sonic scream and then he was exhausted. Sean stopped his cry as well.

"It'll be fun getting what you know," he said looking at Pete, who grinned.

"I was thinking that too." Sean turned and looked as Lydia had soaked up all the solar energy, and had refuelled her own powers. She knew she'd never get to Banshee in time before he stopped her but then that wasn't the plan and she slammed her fists in to Maverick's chest and he then absorbed the impact and rechannelled it as a bio-kinetic blast that bathed Banshee and sent him sprawling. "I love it when a plan comes together," he said as the three of them regarded each other properly for the first time in months. They didn't need to say any words. "Let's get you two the hell out of here," he said.

"What do we tell Terry?" said Lydia as she looked at Banshee.

"I don't know," Pete admitted. "Let's go find the emergency services," he said.

"How will they know where we are?" asked Maverick.

"I kind of set off an explosion, and it turns out we're quite near the Interpol office," he said. "You still have friends there, right, Lyd?"

"Not after this," she muttered and he chuckled.

"It's good to be back together again, isn't it?"

---



---

## THE PARTING OF WAYS

### *Part IV: Revelations*

by **David Wheatley**

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**



**Lydia  
Del Ruiz**



**Theresa  
Rourke**



**David  
North**

"Thank you for your co-operation, Agent Wisdom," the Interpol Task Commander Peter Caranowski said, shaking Pete's hand.

"Not at all," said Pete. "It's just lucky that nobody was seriously hurt, unfortunately the bastards got away."

"I can't believe the gall," Commander Caranowski sighed. "A terrorist organisation like Black Air, right under our noses. The cheek of it." Pete felt bad for the guy, knowing the amount of paperwork that was needed. The Byron Agency had extracted their people in the confusion and the medics were looking after Maverick and Lydia. Pete also knew that there would be trouble, seeing as he was pretending to be an agent of SHIELD and as soon as they checked him out, they'd know he was lying. Then Caranowski would really be in trouble, but by then it would be too late. He always knew that spare badge would come in handy some day.

"We'll get them," Wisdom said. "Nobody does that to our people and gets away with it. I'm just glad you know Lydia, otherwise we'd have had a devil of a time explaining it."

"Well, that badge carries a lot of clout too," Caranowski said. "I hope to get in to SHIELD one day myself."

"I'm sure they'll want to speak to you at some point," Wisdom agreed and he looked as the ambulance driver gave him a thumbs up. "I'll accompany my people to the hospital, but if you need me, contact SHIELD and they'll put you through."

"I'll be in touch," said Caranowski and Pete climbed in to the back of the ambulance which then drove off. Top man, Caranowski thought as he watched it drive off, sirens blaring and he went back to co-ordinating things, only to see a rather bemused paramedic standing there. "You ok, son?"

"I'm not sure," the man said, looking very concerned. "I could have sworn I left my vehicle here..."



**Marcus  
Raven**



**Sarah  
Bane**

---

"Hey babe," said Wisdom as he sat down next to Lydia, seeing how pale she was. Lydia said nothing. "You and I need to talk, and if I'm the only one of who's going to say anything that's fine." She turned her head away. "I don't know what I did that upset you so much, I really don't, but I can hazard a guess. It was Kitty that made you leave, or rather how close we were. Am I right?" There was still no answer. "I admit there's a part of me that's always going to love her, a part of me that's going to want her. The darker side of me would do you, would do her, would do Terry, hell I'd cut a swathe through you all if I thought I could get away with it. Before her, I'd have done it, but I realised what love is, what you can lose, what you really want." He leant over to her, his voice almost a whisper. "Of everyone on the team, the one person who knew me best was you. Not her."

"And I know you didn't love me," Lydia said, still not looking at him. "You have no idea how hard it was, how difficult it was for me to watch you with her, watch how bad she felt when you were injured and know that she was always going to be a spectre over us, over you and anyone else you want to get involved with. Leave me alone, Pete. I left for a reason."

"Fine," said Pete. "After one thing though. Fury believes the Byron Agency had GW Bridge killed, and me and Sarah have found that the French Government is covering up the truth. We're breaking in to the Ministry of the Interior and I need backup. I need you and Maverick."

"Pete, we're in no fit state to do this," said North, who had been listening uncomfortably at the other side of the ambulance. "What you're talking about..."

"Is risking my neck for a dead ally," said Wisdom. "Banshee works for the Byron Agency, the Byron Agency use the same MO for operations as Black Air. If Black Air and the Byron Agency are one and the same, we all have a common foe. I don't have the resources of SHIELD, I just have you."

"And me," called Sarah.

"And her," added Pete. "We can wait a few days, I can pump you up with steroids and stuff or something and we can do this."

"I don't know," Maverick said. "Can we think about it?" Pete nodded.

"We're heading for a small village on the outskirts of Lyon," he

said. "We'll rest there and see what to do next." His eyes turned to Lydia, who wasn't looking at him, but he could see she was crying. "Damn it," he whispered and pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number. "Brian, it's me. I need a favour..."

---

The Hierarchy would be most displeased with Sean Cassidy's performance. First he'd let the X-Men best him and then Wisdom had outsmarted him. He wasn't happy, but he had his people get out and get out quickly and now he was doing damage limitation.

"Commander Caranowski," he said. "I'm Agent Cassidy, I work for the Byron Agency."

Caranowski's brow was furrowed and Sean could see he was having a rough day. "How can I help you?"

"I believe you're looking for my people," Cassidy said. "This was a Byron Agency operation and we've lost two very dangerous prisoners."

"Prisoners?" Caranowski's face fell, as if things were falling in to place. "Oh God..." He pulled himself together. "Regardless of the state of the prisoners, am I to understand they're former SHIELD agents?" Cassidy smiled inwardly.

"You saw them?"

"Their commander said they were SHIELD, then they stole an ambulance." Cassidy felt sorry for the man, knowing he was going to be seriously chastised by his superiors. His superiors were on the telephone to them now, so he knew what was going to happen. "They showed me badges, I should have..." He trailed off, seeing his career evaporating before his eyes.

"Nae, lad," said Sean, comforting him. "You had no idea that they were fakes. They were dangerous and we know it was them that set off the explosion and caused this chaos."

"I'll put out a bulletin, have our people scouring for them," Caranowski started but Sean shook his head.

"We have delegated authority on this case," he said, "however we're handing it over to SHIELD. These rouges are their former agents, it seems fitting they should be the ones to handle it." Cassidy would love to see the look on Fury's face when that came through to him, that he had to designate his former people as terrorists and hunt them down. The real question

would be how much force he put in to it. "Come on, let's go have a coffee and see what we can sort out. We may be able to salvage this yet."

---

Fury shook his head as he read the reports of what had happened in France in the last day or so. Wisdom and his accomplice had gone a bit too far in what they did, but they had rescued North and del Ruiz and that was good to know. Of course, now he needed to send someone after them, but Wisdom had already been thinking ahead and had contacted Brian Braddock, who'd contacted Forge, who'd contacted Fury with a simple message: 'There'd been five Beatles before Martin brought in Ringo.' It seemed fairly innocuous, but Fury thought about it, and pulled up the original file on X-Force. Wisdom, del Ruiz, North, Rourke, Raven. The original five members of the team. If Fury was reading it right, Wisdom was telling him not to send Pryde, or any of the others, but he could feel it was directed at Katherine Pryde, the replacement member when they thought Wisdom had died.

Fury knew he had to send someone after Wisdom, to make it look like they were taking the problem seriously. He'd never formally accepted Wisdom's resignation, and he was supposedly on a leave of absence. Procedure said the ranking officer of the team, or next senior officer in the chain of command, would put a squad together and take the rogue agent down. Technically, Fury was the next ranking agent, and since the review panel were concerned with things being done by the book...

"Get me Agents Rourke and Raven," he said. "Get them to finish their current ops and then reassign them to me, and alert the HERMES team that we're going to France as soon as they return..."

That would give the Byron Agency something to think about.

---

It had been three days since they'd rescued Lydia and David from the Byron Agency. In that time they had arrived at a small village and boarded the Midnight Runner, the formerly the hypersonic jet of the original Excalibur team, which was also a prototype of state of the art medical transports used at Muir Isle. They'd be designed by Brian Braddock and this was his own personal aircraft that he'd lent Wisdom for this. It hid them from prying eye with a cloaking field and allowed the injured agents to regain their strength faster than any hospital would have, but Wisdom and Lydia still weren't talking. He'd tried, but there was nothing and he didn't understand it. He'd heard how

concerned she'd been when he'd been in the medlab at SHIELD, but after he'd recovered, she'd just left. She hadn't even said goodbye and he knew he didn't get it, and she seemed to think he didn't love her. Sarah had been no help on the matter, saying he should just get drunk and get over it and David hadn't provided any insights either.

He'd caught them up to speed on almost everything that had happened, from the happenings with Abyss to the death of Bridge and what they'd found out about the Byron Agency and both Lydia and David agreed the only option was to break in to the Ministry of the Interior. However they all knew that the Byron Agency knew they were coming and Wisdom had also figured they'd bring in SHIELD, just to make it official and avoid any problems like they'd already had, but Pete had a plan. He always had a plan and if the message had gotten through okay, he'd be able to put in action soon enough. There had been a note on the controls of the auto-pilot - 'Not a scratch' and Wisdom knew he was putting Brian's neck on the line as well here.

The Midnight Runner was cloaked and the autopilot could hover over the Ministry of the Interior and then the team could scale down to the offices, get in, get what they needed and get out. It would be made easier by the image inducers they had from the Runner, holdovers from the days when the craft was part of the family of X-Jets.

Sarah was the master thief and she would be able to get in to the offices with ease, with Wisdom, Maverick and Lydia running interference and making sure that the Byron Agency and whatever SHIELD brought with them were kept busy, busy enough for Sarah to get the info and expose the Byron Agency as being complicit in the murder of GW Bridge. He looked at his friends as the jet arrived in position.

"For GW," he said, knowing that was why they were doing this. It wasn't for Pete that they were doing this, it was for their departed friend. He opened the hatch and Maverick jumped first, landing in a crouch as his mutant abilities to absorb impacts protected him from being hurt. Wisdom wasn't far behind using his hot knives to slow his descent.

"Show offs," Sarah muttered and released the cables to allow the two girls to drop.

"Welcome to X-Force," Lydia said, softly and they dropped, a smile crossing Sarah's face, as she wondered at what point she became part of Wisdom's little mutant team. The four of them said nothing as they went to work, getting in to the building through a roof access point. Somewhere an alarm would be

sounding and people would be coming and Sarah hurried. She wasn't sure where she was going, but she was going to trust her instincts and allow her higher sense to guide her. It had rarely failed her in the past.

"We need a distraction from us as well," Maverick said. "Technically none of us are SHIELD." Wisdom nodded and took out a cigarette, lit it and put it as close as he could to a smoke detector and after a moment the fire alarm went. "I was thinking more of one that drew them away from us," said North and Wisdom smiled.

"Trust me," he said as they ducked in to a room. "Lyd, keep that door closed when they come through. You're strong enough to fool them in to thinking it's locked." She nodded and in a moment the door was tried but it didn't move as she pushed on it. Then, when they stopped trying it, Wisdom looked through the keyhole and could see one of the secret service agents out there. He used the image inducer to replicate the uniform and change his facial appearance, the others followed suit, and he watched as the agents started to move off. When they had gone, they slipped out and tagged along, catching up as if they were parts of the team hunting for things. Down the corridor, they could see the agents trying the doors and they joined in.

"What the hell would they be doing here?" a familiar voice asked, coming up the stairs behind them and Wisdom turned. Raven and Teresa were with Fury, in SHIELD uniform and looking ready for a fight and Pete smiled inwardly. The band was almost back together.

"Not sure," Fury said. "We think it's them, but we can't be sure. Security alarm, then fire alarm - certainly drawing attention, but why?"

"Wait," said Raven. "I think..." He looked down the corridor. "It's them!" he said looking at the disguised agents.

"MAV!" Wisdom called and Maverick unleashed a bio-kinetic blast, taking out the French secret service agents and they cancelled the image inducers and the former members of X-Force stood opposite each other, not only on the physical plane but the astral plane as well. "Very nice," Wisdom said.

"Interesting," Wisdom said. "So what do we do now?" "Stand down," Fury said, his weapon pointed at Wisdom. "I don't know what you're doing, but you've crossed the line." "Can't do that, Nick," Wisdom said. "The French are covering up Bridge's death and I want to know why." "It was an accident, plain and simple," said Fury. "If you think that you're deluded," said Wisdom.

"Don't make us fight you." "You can't think you'll win," said Fury said. "We can take you down telepathically." "Shall we find out who's faster," said Pete. "Marcus' psionics or my hot knives?" "We know how you think, we know how you fight," said Lydia. "We don't have to do this." "Very nice," Wisdom said, as each of them gained the plan in their minds. "We won't have long to pull this rouse off," Raven said. "What have you found out?" Fury asked. "Bridge was murdered and the French Interior Minister ordered a cover up," Wisdom replied. "And the Byron Agency and Black Air are one and the same." "My da?" asked Terry, almost in disbelief. "Working with them," said Maverick. "I don't know how they got to him, but they have. I'm sorry, Terry." Theresa didn't answer, but they could sense the sorrow coming off of her. "Problem is Byron have SHIELD by the short and curlies," Fury said. "I need hard proof, that they're Black Air, and they were behind it GW's death." "Working on it," Wisdom said. "We all know the plan?"

"Yes we do," Fury said and he nodded to the other two.

---

Sarah found the Interior Minister's office with relative ease, letting her senses guide her and she stood in the office, wondering where the clues were, the evidence she needed to bring the corruption of the Byron Agency down. As she scoured the room she felt she saw something and looked amongst some papers and there it was - a memo that ordered the case closed, as a personal favour to the Minister. Below that was another memo from the Byron Agency, saying how much they would appreciate the matter being closed, citing several political favours done to put the French government where it was. Then she felt it, the sense that something was lying to her, that something was wrong. It was too easy, these things were in plain sight, ready for her to find. Then there was a high pitched noise, inaudible to anyone but her and the papers disintegrated and there was a flashing light.

"Oh shit," she said and ran for the door, getting there just as an explosion rocked through the offices.

---

"Yes we do," Fury said and he nodded to the other two.

"Sorry, Nick," said Terry and hit him with a sonic burst, slamming him in to the wall. "Did you really think they were alone? We're X-Force."

"I knew you'd bring them," said Wisdom. "Very predictable, and now we're all together again, and we're going to do what you

can't - take down the people you can't touch. It's why I quit, and the proof of the Agency's motives will be here any minute." Then the explosion occurred and the plan was going south, but this was why they had a contingency. "Or not." The team started to run, trying to find Sarah, knowing they only had one chance at getting out of here and they caught each other up about halfway. "Everyone, Sarah, Sarah, everyone. Let's go..."

Terry nodded and pressed a few buttons on a keypad, overriding the HERMES controls. It was good for one jaunt and not very far otherwise the SHIELD techs could stop them, but the Midnight Runner wasn't far away and they were quickly aboard the plane and they destroyed the SHIELD gear.

The orders Fury had given them on the astral plane were simple. If they couldn't get the proof, then X-Force were to go deep undercover and do whatever it took to take down the Byron Agency. Theresa and Raven were in on it because of what had happened between Banshee and Fury and she wanted to free her father from whatever hold they had on him, and Raven was part of the team. They'd be outlaws until everything was sorted, hunted by the Byron Agency, by SHIELD, by many others, but their job was simple - stop the Byron Agency from completing their agenda. SHIELD couldn't touch them, but X-Force could.

"I don't understand," said Maverick as the Midnight Runner headed for England and a safe rendezvous point with Brian. "Where was Shadowcat?"

"Told Fury I didn't want her here," said Wisdom, looking at Lydia. "I want the X-Force I chose, not the X-Force we became. Right now, we just became pretty big terrorists. We set off an explosion at an archaeological monument and attacked a government installation. We're on the run."

"Thanks for letting us in on that bit of the plan," Maverick said. "Lydia and I aren't... It's not what we wanted."

"I know," Wisdom said, still not taking his eyes off his ex-girlfriend, "but I can't do this without you. All of you, but whoever wants out, it's been arranged. Make your choices when we get to the UK, but first I need to tell you about what happened with Abyss."

Raven linked their minds, to let them see the truth, and then it would be decision time. The team were back together; it was getting them to stay together that would be the real test.

---

**Next issue:** *Can Wisdom convince the team to stay together and go on the run in order to stop the Byron Agency, and how will Fury be able to explain the defection of two more agents? The all new X-Force continues*

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**



**Lydia  
Del Ruiz**



**Theresa  
Rourke**

Nick Fury knew this was going to happen. He knew well enough that when news he had lost two more agents to Pete Wisdom's merry band, there'd be hell to pay and he was right. He'd been summoned to Geneva to face the music and try and explain how the five original members of his X-Force project had defected and were now acting as terrorists. He wanted to tell them that they weren't, that they were operating under his instructions and were deep, deep undercover, but he couldn't and the facts spoke for themselves.

Since being in France, Wisdom had detonated a car bomb at a tourist attraction, attacked a Byron Agency field office and taken two prisoners, hoodwinked Interpol (though, as Fury said, if that was a crime then they'd all be in jail) and stormed the French Ministry of the Interior. The French authorities were buying for blood, especially as it wasn't so long since the Paris attack. However, it wasn't like Nick hadn't thought of this. He and Forge had been working to solve this, Forge working remotely from Genosha. They had set up several things for Wisdom, such as false accounts, a base of operations and a jet. They had almost everything they needed and Forge would be supplying them with intelligence reports on what SHIELD was doing to apprehend them.

The cover story was simple. The United Nations knew of the situation with Abyss and how personally it connected with Wisdom. Wisdom had gone on a sabbatical from SHIELD to find himself, so far the truth, but while he was gone, Wisdom had decided that Abyss was everywhere and the only way he could do that was by having a group watching him. Fury had smiled inwardly as he said Wisdom had connected the Byron Agency and Abyss, even though there was no apparent connection, and he engendered enough loyalty in his former charges to find out. Maverick and Del Ruiz were his advance scouts, trying to find information, and it had all gone from there. This was what they had obtained from the various personal logs and other SHIELD reports that Wisdom and his team had filed, but he'd not told all of X-Force, keeping the later members of squad out of it. Wisdom was a paranoid, delusional man, but he had the courage of his convictions, and he'd stop at nothing to get to Abyss and the Byron Agency.

It was exceptionally close to the truth, so close that the Security Council seemed content with that, but insisted that Fury resolve the situation. Of course, he'd said, he would give it his highest priority. In fact, he had added, with permission of the Security Council, he would reassemble the remainder of X-Force and have them head up the hunt for the rogue agents. Who better to catch them than those who knew them best? The council had agreed, however they would not allow the use of the X-Force name. As far as they were concerned, X-Force was a terrorist organisation. They had been terrorists under Cable,

they were now terrorists under Wisdom. Fury agreed, and now he was back on the Helicarrier, sitting at his desk, preparing to activate his new Team X, which was what he had decided on calling the other agents. He needed to appear to be working on this, while also holding the former X-Force agents back. He was playing a very dangerous game, for exceptionally high stakes. The ones who had volunteered were Siryn, Raven and Wisdom, and Fury hoped he could get Maverick and Del Ruiz on board as well.

All they had to do was put aside any personal differences they had...

---

## DIFFERENCES



by **David Wheatley**

---

The small island known as Doral's Point in the Outer Hebrides, the western isles of Scotland, had been secured for the team as a safe house by Brian Braddock, on behalf of Forge. He'd been unable to go with them, and Wisdom wouldn't have asked him to anyway. He was already going to get questions over his links



**Marcus  
Raven**



**Sarah  
Bane**

to Wisdom from SHIELD. It was as good a safe house as any, remote from the mainland of the UK, surrounded by rough seas and high cliffs. Forge had installed plenty of things there, using it as a base of operations for himself while he was in hiding during the Genesis debacle, and for now it worked as a hideaway for X-Force, until Wisdom could arrange safehouses of their own across the world. With a little help, anyway.

For the most part, the building looked like an old dilapidated shell, the windows having been fitted with one way glass, so that anyone who looked in from a distance would just see darkness and think the place was still deserted. Add to that the anti-radar filters that protected it from detection by the local military bases and it was as secure as they could manage it.

Wisdom and Bane had been working hard over the last few days with the computers, setting up new identities, bank accounts and the lot. They had all talked about things the last few days and Lydia and David had still to make up their minds. Wisdom, credit, had tried with Lydia but hadn't pushed her. He knew this was a tenuous time between the two of them, and if he had any hope of salvaging the relationship, then he needed to do this properly. They were still upset that they were all on the run, and he'd rather forced them in to it. There were shades of the way that he'd put the original team together in that.

As Pete wandered back to his room he heard music coming from Maverick's room and he knew the album.

"That's the Barenaked Ladies," he said to himself. North had introduced him to the band a little while ago and they were pretty good, for Canadians. Considering this was the country that had given the world Bryan Adams and Celine Dion, Wisdom had wondered if there was any talent in the country at all. The door was slightly ajar and he watched as Maverick jived away to the song that just started playing.

*"It's been one week since you looked at me  
Cocked your head to the side and said I'm angry  
Five days since you laughed at me saying  
Get that together come back and see me  
Three days since the living room  
I realized it's all my fault but couldn't tell you  
Yesterday you'd forgiven me  
But it'll still be two days 'till I say I'm sorry."*

As the music played Maverick was moving and waving his arms and Pete couldn't help but suppress a smile, and then he had an idea and just as the next bit of the song was about to start, he burst in to the room and started to sing.

*"Hold it now and watch the hoodwink  
As I make you stop, think  
You'll think you're looking at Aquaman  
I summon fish to the dish  
Although I like the Chalet Swiss  
I like the sushi  
'Cause it's never touched a frying pan."*

He looked at Maverick and gave a slight nod, and North continued.

*"Hot like wasabe when I bust rhymes  
Big like LeAnn Rimes  
Because I'm all about value  
Bert Kaempfert's got the mad hits  
You try to match wits  
You try to hold me but I bust through."*

Then the two of them worked in unison.

*"Gonna make a break and take a fake  
I'd like a stinkin' achin' shake  
I like vanilla, it's the finest of the flavors  
Gotta see the show  
'Cause then you'll know  
The Vertigo is gonna grow  
Cause it's so dangerous  
You'll have to sign a waiver."*

"Are you two enjoying yourselves?" Theresa interrupted, watching from the doorway, and the two of them turned in a slightly embarrassed state. She was grinning, amused by the whole thing.

"A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do," Pete said with a shrug.

"If I were you, I'd leave the voice work to me," Terry said with a wink. She gave a wave and left them to it.

"Everyone's a critic," said David as he turned the music off and the two of them regarded each other. "I'm getting too old for this kind of stuff, Pete."

"You're not the only one," said Wisdom. "Do you think I enjoy being a real life James Bond?"

"Yes, I do." The answer came without any hesitation.

"I enjoy the good bits," Wisdom admitted, "but have you seen the cost? To my soul, to my sanity, to my relationships? I've

lost a lot of people close to me, we both have, but it's a job that needs doing. Abyss is out there, he has what's left of my sister and I can't take him alone. I don't even know if we can take him together. Then there are the Byrons. Black Air reborn and they're trying to take over the world. The sins of the past, Dave, and you know the one thing I really want?"

"What?"

"I want Lydia to love me again. I'd say the hell with it all, if she asked me to. What happened between Kitty, between you and me. That wasn't cool, mate." They sat down on the bed. "I love Katherine Pryde, she was the first girl I ever really loved, but I couldn't be what she wanted and it broke my heart. Then I met Lydia and whatever I felt for Kitty was a memory. Then things got in the way and everything was messed up."

"The Shadow King, Apocalypse, Genesis," said Maverick and Wisdom nodded.

"I don't want to be with Kate. I had no choice. You know what we did to Dallas Riordan, what I did to Jessica Drew. They tapped in to the darkest parts of me and brought them out. I was angry with Kate when she said she wanted an abortion, because I want kids. Can't have them, not with this kind of life, but... I want to have a legacy that's more than death and destruction."

"I know what you mean," said Maverick, thinking back of the family he'd lost.

"I was relieved when she miscarried," said Wisdom softly. "I almost got on my knees and thanked God, because he took the decision out of her hands. And I was angry with myself for it, so I decided I was going to find Iceman and beat the crap out of him. Take it out on him."

"Did you?" asked Maverick and Wisdom shook his head.

"Couldn't do it," he said. "It wasn't his fault, not really, and the poor bastard feels guilty enough anyway. I promised that myself I'd make it up to Kitty though. How can you be glad someone lost a child? A child that could have been your own?"

"It was mine though," said David. "The tests..."

"I know," said Pete, interrupting. "I do know and you've no idea how sorry I am."

"She didn't love me though," said North. "I don't think she ever did." The two of them looked at each other. "We need more

than this, Pete. That's why I'm not sure I can stay. Starting again seems appealing."

"I can understand that," Wisdom replied. "It's why I tried to quit SHIELD., but what if this is what we're supposed to be? Why should men like us find happiness? Did you hear what happened with Wolverine?"

"No," said Maverick. "I thought he was dead." Wisdom shook his head

"He and Elektra were whisked to another dimension, got married and had a life for about ten minutes, before they ended up back here, just as Almagordo exploded. They were amnesiac and they didn't know each other or something and they fought. Elektra died."

"Again?" Maverick shook his head. "How many times is that now?"

"Four, five? It's getting old," said Pete. "That's not the point."

"Which is?"

"You take the moments of happiness you can get. You never know if they'll last, or if they'll come around again, but you have to be true to yourself as well." He stood up. "I'd like you to help me on this, David, but I won't force the issue. It's up to you." Maverick said nothing and his friend left the room, both of them thinking over what had been said.

---

Sarah Bane was getting coffee from the filter machine and she shook her head as she took a sip. American's had no appreciation of coffee. It was bland, manufactured, one every street corner type of coffee. She made a mental note to go to one of the other islands at some point and get some good stuff.

"Ah'd try the tea instead," Marcus suggested as he watched her. "You Brits know how to get a decent cup of tea."

"Thanks," said Sarah as she poured the excuse for coffee down the sink. "You're the telepath." Raven nodded as she turned on the kettle. "Wouldn't try scanning me, it's not too easy."

He smiled. "Ah know the feeling. Got some pretty powerful psi-defences of my own."

"Useful. Known too many tepes go rogue because someone

gets inside their head." She glanced at him. "Aren't you a bit old to play secret agent?"

"Used to be FBI," he reminisced. "Until they fired me for being a mutant." Sarah winced. It was a stark reminder that the US weren't as tolerant of people as they were in the UK, and the British tolerance had limits these days too. "Ah'm older than Ah look as well. Ah don't seem to age that quickly, or should Ah say Ah age better than most?"

"Either way, it's useful. You prefer melee fighting or staying back and using your powers?"

"Depends on the mood," Marcus shrugged. "Though I'm easy either way." She nodded. "Ah was actually looking for you, though." She looked up and raised an eyebrow, questioning the comment. "You need to talk to Lydia, about Pete."

"Me?" He nodded. "Why me?"

"Because she won't listen to him, and you know him best. She loves him, she always has, but she doesn't think that he loves her, and she thinks we're just trying to keep the team together. You're a neutral party."

"It does need sorting," she agreed. "Pete's had a face like a robber's dog since we got here."

"A what?" asked Marcus.

"He's been ugly because of his mood," she said. "You think she'd listen to me?"

"Worth a try," he said and she put down her cup of tea.

"What the hell?" and she wandered off to find the other woman as Terry walked by.

"You spoke to her?" she asked Marcus and he nodded. "I think Pete and David have sorted things out as well."

"We're almost back in business," he said, picking up the drink Sarah had just made. "Damn good cup of tea."

---

Sarah knocked on the door of Lydia's room and waited. There was no reply, but she could hear movement inside. No speaking, just movement and she focused her senses to see if she was alone in there. It seemed so she knocked again.

"Lydia, it's Sarah, do you have a moment?" she called out and after a moment Lydia opened the door.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

"Can I come in? I think we should have a chat."

"About him?" Sarah knew she meant Pete and nodded. Lydia sighed and stepped out of the way. "You'd better come in then."

"This wasn't my idea," she said as she came in. "Marcus and Theresa thought it'd be good for us to talk."

"So what do you have to say then?" Lydia asked, and Sarah glanced around the room. The bags in the place were packed and there were no obvious signs that this was anything more than a place to sleep until she was on her way.

"Have you any idea what he's going through?" she said. "From what I can tell, you're one of the few who've managed to see him as he is, behind the bravado, the swagger. Do you not get how much it's killing him inside?"

"What, being without me?" Lydia shook her head. "Don't tell me you've bought that as well."

"I don't buy any of his attitude for a moment," said Sarah. "I looked in to his eyes and I see all I need to see. You don't need enhanced senses to see the pain he carries with him every day, the way he has to keep himself going by doing everything he can."

"I know that Pete Wisdom," Lydia answered. "I know he doesn't love me though. I've seen him with Kitty, how he showed her something he never showed me."

Sarah sighed. "I swear to God, if I come face to face with her, I'm going to beat the crap out of her. She was seventeen when she met Wisdom, her hormonally charged body, combined with that tight latex costume... no bloody wonder he wanted to get her naked."

"You're saying she was a tease?"

"No, I'm saying she was a seventeen year old wanting to explore her sexuality and he was a relative stranger who fancied her rotten. Right place, right time. He loved her, I don't doubt that, but she never loved him, not really. What the hell do seventeen year olds know about love?"

"I'm no fan of hers, but she'd been though a lot," said Lydia.

"And yet she still had no idea of how to treat him. Do you know how many people he's said 'I love you' to in his life, ever?"

"No," said Lydia, uncertain she wanted to know.

"Two. You and her, and I've never seen him so broken as when he walked away from her."

"Not even on undercover missions?"

"Especially not then," she said, shaking her head. "It'd have made things so much easier at times, but he had to be a principled assassin." Lydia smiled in spite of herself. "You love him, I can see it."

"You got that from a smile?" There was slight embarrassment on her face, but Sarah shook her head.

"I got that from increased heartbeat, the way the hairs stood on end, the glazed look on your eyes and the shallowing of breath when I said 'you and her'. Enhanced senses are great."

"Not too obvious then," she said with relief.

"Look, I know you think he doesn't love you, and that he chose her over you, but you never gave him the chance. You walked away before he could talk to you, and it hurt him. He quit SHIELD because of you. Yes, there were other reasons, but you were the thing that kept him there. He could handle it all, knowing that the woman he loved was going to hold his hand when he needed it."

"Don't be ridiculous," Lydia scoffed.

"Don't dismiss it so quickly," Sarah said. "I've known him a lot longer than you have. He's like my little brother in a lot of ways. I love him dearly, but there's times when he's just annoying and in need of a slap. It doesn't mean I don't keep an eye on him, and those he cares about."

"You're very alike," Lydia said after a moment.

"Go talk to him," Sarah said. "Sort it out once and for all, and then if you're going to leave, at least you'll do it on equal terms. After everything you've been through, you owe each other that much." Lydia looked at her, thinking over the words and then she left. "You're welcome," Sarah muttered.

---

"Drove downtown in the rain, nine thirty on a Tuesday night," Pete softly sang to himself as he looked out of the window, watching it rain. The lights were off and he was alone with his thoughts on life and a song in his head. "Just to check out the late night record shop." There was a knock at the door and he wondered who this could be, though his choice of people was quite narrow. He wandered to the door and opened it, then he took a step back. "Lydia."

"Hi," she said, standing there, he hands behind her back, so he couldn't see how she was wringing them in nervousness. "I think... Pete, we should talk."

"I think you're right," he said, and stepped out of the doorway. "Come in?" She took a few steps forward and entered the room as he turned the lights on. He sat down on his bed. "Please, sit." He gestured to the vacant chair that was pointing towards the window. She came in and sat down. "What... how can I help?"

"I think we need to talk about you and me," she said. Pete's first thought was to say 'what you and me?' but he just looked at her. "I'm sorry," she started. "I shouldn't have left like that, it was uncalled for, you didn't deserve that."

"Hey, don't worry about it," he said. "I'll admit it hurt, and I didn't get it at first but then I realised that maybe I'd been focusing too much on Kitty, and taking you for granted. I shouldn't have done that, babe. I'm sorry too."

"I don't dislike Kitty," said Lydia, "I just don't get what you see in her."

"Saw in her, Lyd. And despite what people think it's not because she was 17 and wore skin-tight latex. It was more about who she was than anything. She wasn't perfect, she knew it, but she did what needed to be done, without thought or fear for herself. She gave unconditionally. I never thought that she and I would end up together. I didn't think I was capable of love."

"Why?"

"I've killed. I've slaughtered. I've enjoyed it and I'm good at it. Hot knives can kill better than wound. I can beat the shit of people, get a confession out of almost anyone, but it all caught up with me and I fell apart, which is how I got transferred to Excalibur, and the rest is history. I loved my Mum, and my family, but I was a monster, and I've seen it come out time and

again in the last year and a bit."

"And Kitty awoke it in you?"

"Yeah. I've slept with a lot of women in my time, but she was the first one it actually mattered about, but I was on a hiding to nothing in the end. She... out grew me. I wanted a relationship, she wanted to save the world. Different outlooks, different opinions. I think she loved me, at first, but she doesn't now. Hasn't for a long time and I thought I'd been punished for the things I'd done. I was still a monster, and the universe doesn't forget. Then I met you."

"Me?"

"You know this stuff, Lyd," he said uncomfortable.

"Tell me again." She looked at him. "Please."

"I thought you'd be a good shag, but a bit of an uppity princess, but we spent those weeks in hospital, we got to know each other and I found you were like her, a lot like her in your outlook, but more assured, more confident. I can't wear my mask twenty four seven and you saw me as I was, and I found I didn't want to wear the mask with you. I was falling for you, falling pretty hard."

"But Kitty came back."

"Yeah." He got up and crossed to his jacket and picked up a cigarette and lit it. "Kitty shouldn't have been part of X-Force. You know what made things worse between us than anything? I was aware of what was happening in my own little way, and deep, deep down inside untouched by any alien crystals or telepathic suggestions, I was screaming that this wasn't what I wanted. And then she got pregnant."

"You took her decision hard, that was when I figured how much you loved her," said Lydia. "You were so upset by the decision to have an abortion and after she miscarried, you were more than nice to her. It seemed such a radical change. It hurt, Pete. I felt rejected."

"I do know," he said. "Well, I realised after you left, anyway. I want a family, Lydia. I want to be a daddy, to wake up next to a mummy, knowing our child is sleeping at the foot of the bed, and she was just... throwing it all away. The thing I wanted most, above anything else, and she was getting rid of it."

Lydia could see there were tears forming in his eyes. "You never said."

"How could I? How could I say to you I want Kitty to keep our baby? I didn't want her, I wanted the kid." He closed his eyes. "I was... I was glad when she miscarried." He imagined her recoiling in horror at that, and he kept his eyes closed, not wanting to see that look on her face. "I told you I was a monster."

"So was I," Lydia whispered and he opened his eyes to look at her, and she was sat next to him. "I hoped it would bring you and me back to us. It drove us further apart."

"I tried to make it up to her," he said. "I overcompensated for the guilt and I drove you away. Then the stuff with Abyss, and Romany, and I needed you because you were the only one who knew me. You were the only one who'd listen to me, and you were gone."

"Do you love me?" Lydia asked.

"With all my heart," Wisdom said, putting his hand on hers. "I love you Lydia del Ruiz. I have to do this stuff for Nick, I wish I didn't, because then we'd could be free, we could go somewhere and start over again and forget Pete Wisdom and Lydia del Ruiz, and be new people. I know you don't want to stay, but I want you to. I don't want to do this without you, but I don't know what you want."

"You," she said, letting his fingers slip in to hers. "I just don't know if we'll work out, Pete. I do believe you, and I know you love me. I can't hide from that, but this life isn't made for relationships."

"How about we try anyway?" Pete suggested. "I love you, you love me and we're good together. Operationally speaking." She smiled, the first one he'd seen from her since they'd been reunited. "I just..." He trailed off. "I want to share the adventure with you, Lyd."

"Fighting Black Air? I'm not..." He put his finger on her lips and he silenced her.

"I mean life," he said. "I want to share my life with you."

Wait," she started. "Are you saying what I think you are?"

"As soon as we find a country we're not wanted in, Lydia..." He looked her in the eye and took her hands in his. "Will you marry me?"

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**



**Lydia  
Del Ruiz**



**Theresa  
Rourke**



**David  
North**

"Do you love me?" Lydia asked him.

"With all my heart," Pete Wisdom answered her, putting his hand on hers. "I love you Lydia del Ruiz. I have to do this stuff for Nick, I wish I didn't, because then we'd could be free, we could go somewhere and start over again and forget Pete Wisdom and Lydia del Ruiz, and be new people. I know you don't want to stay, but I want you to. I don't want to do this without you, but I don't know what you want."

"You," she said, letting his fingers slip in to hers. "I just don't know if we'll work out, Pete. I do believe you, and I know you love me. I can't hide from that, but this life isn't made for relationships."

"How about we try anyway?" Pete suggested. "I love you, you love me and we're good together. Operationally speaking." She smiled, the first one he'd seen from her since they'd been reunited. "I just..." He trailed off. "I want to share the adventure with you, Lyd."

"Fighting Black Air? I'm not..." He put his finger on her lips and he silenced her.

"I mean life," he said. "I want to share my life with you."

Wait," she started. "Are you saying what I think you are?"

"As soon as we find a country we're not wanted in, Lydia..." He looked her in the eye and took her hands in his. "Will you marry me?"

---

## **THE TIES THAT BIND Part 1: Together Again**

by [David Wheatley](#)

---

"No."

"That was a bit swift off the mark," he said, slightly annoyed.



**Marcus  
Raven**



**Sarah  
Bane**

"You want to try thinking about it first?"

"Don't be mad," she replied, cradling his cheek with her hand. "We've just found each other again, and we can't plaster over the problems we had. We need to work this all out first before we can seriously think about getting married."

"You're not opposed to the idea, then?" he asked, looking at her. It was a truly pained look in his eyes and Lydia knew that it had hurt.

"No, I'm not," she said and kissed him. "Just not yet, Peter."

"Will you stay, at least?" he said, trying desperately not to let the desperation he felt come through and she smiled.

"We can't work all this out if I don't," she said. "Besides, if you're serious, you're going to have ask my Father."

Pete closed his eyes, knowing what that meant. "But he's missing. Missing in Genosha. Don't make me go to Genosha, there's an evil spirit in that sodding place and it hates me."

"Don't be silly," she said. "And yes, you do. If you're serious. But we've plenty of time yet."

"I wonder," he mused, "which of us will get the other killed first..." She shook her head.

"I'm wondering something else," she said.

"Like?"

"Like is your door locked?" He fired a hot knife, wrapped it around the key and used it to turn it in the lock.

"Is now." He started to nuzzle her neck. "Though I've just melted the end of the key. We could be trapped in here." Nuzzling became kissing. "Maybe for days."

"Shut up," she whispered and pulled him down on to the bed.

---

The next morning the two of them sauntered in to the kitchen area, where the others just watched as they entered.

"You're holding hands," said David, trying to act nonchalant.

"I doubt that's the only thing they've been holding," said Sarah

and Pete shook his head.

"You can say what you want, you can't spoil my mood," he said. "However, the band is back together."

"About damn time," said Siryn as she passed them coffee. "Maybe we can start to get things back to normal."

"I've been thinking about that," said Pete. "Seeing as how we're close by, who fancies a trip to Muir Isle? Call in on Moira..."

"Why do Ah think that's not as altruistic as it seems?" Raven said.

"It turns out that Agent Cassidy has... rekindled his romantic liaisons with the good doctor," Pete said.

"That's what was in your email?" Lydia said and he nodded. "Who from?"

"Let's just say I know people who know people and the less you know about the people I know the better," he said. "Sarah, did you have any luck with that little computer sting, by the way?"

"Oh yes," she said with a smile. "I don't think I got all his accounts, and certainly not any secret resources he has but Joseph Chapman just lost quite a bit of money."

"Oh too bad," said Wisdom. "I think we should go to Vegas..."

"Why?" asked Maverick with a sigh. "I thought you'd given up on that."

"He said I couldn't touch him. He's going to find out how wrong he was. In fact right about now, all his London properties will be going up in flames."

"You're starting a war with him," Lydia said. "He's going to be upset."

"He told me he had powerful backers, people who could get me no matter what. The only people who are capable of that seem to be the Byrons. He's as dirty as they are and I promise you this - I'm going to settle a lot of scores. The Byrons, Black Air, Chapman and what's left of the Hellfire Club, and Abyss."

"Can we take Abyss?" asked Siryn, concerned. "He's got a lot of power."

"I'm working on it," Wisdom answered, "however there's a few

things on Muir Isle that can help, and I think it's time that the doctor heard just what Banshee's been up to."

"What about the X-Men?" asked Terry, and they looked at her.

"Before we left SHIELD, there was a rumour that the X-Men took on the Byron's, broke in to one of their facilities. There's a good chance she knows all about them, and she might know all about my da as well."

"Fine," said Pete. "Then we need to know which side of the fence she's on, and it's useful to know about the X-Men too. You never know when you might need some help, and we are an X team after all."

"One that blows things up, beats up law enforcement officers, steals from respected superheroes, and is on the run from pretty much everyone," Lydia reminded.

Pete mused on it a moment. "Sounds like a X team to me," he said. "Terry?"

"He has a point," she admitted.

"Sounds like every encounter I've had with them too," Maverick said. "They might not like the association though."

"Too damn bad," said Pete. "Get ready – we're heading for Muir." He nodded to Lyd, who shook her head, but she knew what he was like and moved off with the others to make preparations, and as Sarah passed her former trainee, he put his hand on her shoulder. "Sarah," Pete said, "got a sec? I've something else in mind for you..."

---

The two of them dreamed, both prisoners of the Byron Agency, both unaware in a conscious state that they were once again so close, yet so far apart from each other, except in the one place that truly mattered. They shared a bond beyond anyone and anything else – a love that was beyond life, beyond death. They had lost and found each other time and again and they each had a piece of each other's soul within their own.

"How can this be?" he said. "You died. I killed you."

"I thought so too," she answered her love. "I thought I was dead again, but Death did not claim me. I lived."

"I don't understand." He truly did not know, but he also was

relieved. He had not been himself, and she had not been herself. The trauma of their return to this world had been too much for either of them.

"I lay there, and Death spoke to me. I have come back once too often, and she will no longer take me. My soul is tainted. By the Hand, by the Destroyer, by Mephisto, by you. Coming back from the dead so many times has had a price. I cannot die. Not yet."

"But you can die?" She smiled at him

"While you live, I live. While I live, you live. Inseparable, even by death, no matter what forces conspire against us."

"Forces?"

"The Byron Agency, a rogue outfit. When I awoken from my deathlike state, my mind is... fragmented, except on a subconscious level. My Chaste training, the training we both have, which is how we connect now."

"They have you prisoner?"

"I am their puppet, their assassin. They sent me for before. They have him as well. The family is together, but divided."

"Him?"

"A child such as that was too powerful to let such fools as those waste him."

"I will come for you, darlin'." She knew the determination in his voice. "I'll find you and kill every last bastard who stands in my way."

"My dearest Logan." There was such a resigned sadness in her voice. "When I awake I will have to fight you. When you awake, you will not remember I am here. This is no simple dream, this is beyond psychic power, this is a soul connection."

"Elektra..."

"We will be reunited someday, my love. If even death cannot separate us for long, life surely can't either."

"I will remember." He swore it. "I will remember."

"You thought I was dead." He paused. "Only now do you know otherwise, for we are close enough for your senses to just

detect me and you have become open to the possibility. We have this time, and then you will go your way and I will go mine, but while we are fortunate to be this close, we can be together, night after night, in this special place. When you or I are moved once more, you by your captor or me by mine and then we will lose each other again. We have come together by coincidence, not by design. "

"This ain't fair." The bitterness echoed. "What more do we have to do to finally be together."

"Our dues are not yet paid." They looked at each other and knew. They had respites, glimpses of what they could, what they would eventually have and he knew he still had much to do before he could gain inner peace and she too had much to atone for. Until they did, their life together could never truly be permanent. "My husband."

"My wife."

They held each other and waited for one of them to awaken first. If they only had a short time together, they would use it well.

---

"What do you think she dreams of?" said one of the Byron Agents, looking at Elektra, laid out on the floor, her breathing so shallow and her skin so pale that they could almost swear she was dead. Their orders came from the highest levels, protect Weapon Chi. Montclair had ordered it and they knew what would happen if they failed him.

"She doesn't dream," his comrade said. "She's mindless. Her body's an empty vessel. Watch." He looked about, then unlocked her door and crept in. Then he put his hand upon her crotch, slipping his hand inside her thong. "See what I mean?"

"You're a pervert," the other chuckled. "You know what'll happen if they catch you doing that."

"You know, I think she likes it..." He started to say, but a hand came up and grabbed his throat before he could finish. Finely honed nails dug in to the tender flesh and ripped out his Adam's apple without giving him chance to react and the hand limply fell back, holding the bloodied lump as the Agent tried in vain to help his dying friend. There was no discernible change in Elektra, except what could have been the vaguest of smiles upon her lips...

---

"A super boat with stealth capability?" said Marcus as the boat crashed through the waves towards Muir Isle. The original five members of the team were on board, Sarah staying behind in case something went wrong. "I'm glad Forge is on our side."

"You and me both," said Pete. He smiled as he saw it. "There she is." He pulled the handset from the radio. "I just hope she hasn't changed the special frequencies since I was last here." He pressed the transmit button. "MacTaggart, you vicious old harpy, permission to dock, over."

"Vicious old harpy?" said Maverick, raising an eyebrow. "You really do have a way with women."

"If you don't say yes I'm going to dock anyway," Wisdom said, ignoring the others.

"I dinnae believe it," came the reply. "Is that Peter bleedin' Wisdom?"

"Who the hell else is it going to be? You're Scottish, not deaf." He winked at the others. "She loves it really."

"I do not," Moira responded. "I really hoped I'd nae hear from you again."

"Missed you too," he answered. "We'll be arriving in about ten minutes. Don't bother putting the coffee on, I remember how you make it."

"See you shortly," she said. He put the handset back and turned to look at his team.

"That was easy wasn't it?" he said with a smile.

---

"You were saying?" said Lydia as they arrived, only to find themselves surrounded by armed Byron Agents as they stepped off the boat.

"I might have miscalculated slightly," he said. "How do you lot want to play this?" The team knew he was addressing the Agents.

"I think you'll be standing down," said Moira as they parted and she came forward. "There'll be no violence here."

"You're with the Byrons?" said Pete. "Huh, did not see that one coming."

"I've activated a dampening field on Muir," she said. "Your powers will nae work here, which leaves you outgunned and outnumbered."

"Let's go to Muir," muttered Maverick. "It'll work out fine..." Pete sighed as they were marched up towards the holding area, where mutants like Spoor and Proteus had been held previously and the guards searched the boat.

"Where's the new one?" Moira asked.

"Sarah? She decided to sit this one out," Wisdom said. "She's gone to Edinburgh to see if she can get us tickets to the Fringe festival. I know it's not quite August yet, but you know how quickly the good seats go."

"There's nobody else on the boat, Commander," reported one of the Agents and Moira nodded.

"I can't believe you've turned on us, on the X-Men," said Siryn and Moira shot her a look.

"The X-Men died with Charles Xavier," she said. "Sean and I have talked about this at length and I was far more involved with the X-Men than any of you. Cyclops was never ready to lead the team and Storm's leadership had them leaning from one crisis to another. Charles would never have let half the things that have happened happen, and the fools who run the school in his name aren't even a fraction of the man he was."

"And Banshee is?" said Raven.

"Sean's found a new way, a way to stop anything like the rise of the Shadow King or Apocalypse from happening again. The Byron Agency are going to be order within the chaos.. They're..."

"They're Black Air, you ignorant bint!" snapped Wisdom, having heard enough. "Remember them? The ones who stole Douglock from your island, experimented on him and released a demon under London? And that's just the beginning..."

"They're not the same now," said Moira, folding her arms. "If they were Sean wouldn't be working for them."

"What about the X-Men?" said Lydia. "They're your friends, and

the Byron Agency..."

"The X-Men," MacTaggert said, "and I are no longer associated. I love Sean. I believe what he tells me, and after the last few years why should anyone trust the X-Men, especially those we're holding captive. Logan alone is more dangerous than ever..."

"You've lost your mind," said Terry. "What will Kevin say when he finds out?"

"Kevin is either with me or against me," she said. "I was ready to kill him before, I'm ready to do it now." She turned to go. "Make yourselves comfortable, the Agency will be here for you soon enough." Then she was gone.

"That went well," said Pete, sitting down. "At least they left me my cigarettes."

"Our first mission out and we're being held captive," said Maverick. "Not the best of starts."

"Tell me you have a plan," said Lydia and she could hear Pete chuckle.

"Of course I do." He tapped his cigarette on the back of his hand. "Sarah – as we planned it." There were audible cries of disbelief at that. "We were doing the spy game a lot longer than any of you. Except Davey, of course. I got wind that MacTaggert had turned, that's why we're really here." He sighed. "It was a nice boat. Hope Forge can build another..." There was the sound of a muffled explosion and then the power went out. "Time to leave."

"Where was Sarah?" Lydia asked as the mutants created themselves new doorways with their newly restored powers.

"Being dragged behind us. Put her in a wet suit, gave her an oxygen tank, sorted," he said with a smile. "She was the only one of us who could take that kind of ride, though she wasn't happy about it."

"I'll bet," said Maverick. "So what do we do now?"

"Easy," said Wisdom. "We blow up Moria's research station, steal her Midnight Runner and get the hell out of here."

"What about her?" asked Siryn. "I don't really want to hurt her."

"I know," said Pete, "but if it comes down to it, I'll take her out. She won't feel a thing, I promise."

"Wait," said Marcus. "I can hear her thoughts. She's not a Byron, she's just working with them at the request of the X-Men to try and find their missing colleagues. She's not in charge here either. It's a General Meyer."

"Same plan," Wisdom decided, not missing a beat. "But without the killing Moira part. Go."

---

The Agents had been distracted by the explosion and had been caught off guard when the power went off and they weren't prepared for an assault by the mutants with their powers. His Byron Agents were an elite troop, but they hadn't been equipped for this, though they would give it their all. The Irishman would not be pleased, but General Meyer wasn't afraid of the Irishman. He had more clout with the Hierarchy than Sean Cassidy, which was why he had been able to put a swarm of Agents on Muir Isle over Cassidy's objections. He didn't trust MacTaggart, but this had been done by the book and he'd made one mistake – he'd underestimated Wisdom, because of his inherent belief that the Irishman was incompetent.

That would change.

"I'll handle this, Doctor," he instructed her and began to go and prepare. While his people may not be able to take X-Force out, he was sure they could keep them here long enough for reinforcements to arrive. The power had been disconnected with great ease, which meant that Sarah Bane was about somewhere. Meyer had fought mutants, metas and other abominations as part of his work within the Byron Agency and if he knew one thing, it was his limitations. He would find this particular thorn in the side of the Agency and excise it. He doubted that even she had told her terrorist allies what the Agency were after her for, and he pulled his handheld Cerebro unit out. That hadn't been affected by the power loss and he saw five signatures grouped together, which had to be the formerly captive X-Force, with one dot moving towards them.

"Bane," he said and went after her. He had read her profile, knew her powers, knew what she could do and what it would take to overpower her sensory perceptions. With her distracted like that she would be easy prey. He was sure the Agency would take something from this, he swore it.

---

As X-Force fought with everything they had, Lydia suddenly felt faint. In her mind she could see a darkness, a pervasive sense of despair and fear and it was as if time itself stopped and she was no longer on Muir Isle, but in a graveyard. She was dressed formally, but she couldn't move or turn around, but she knew she was crying and she looked down as the casket was lowered in to the ground and she threw soil over it and she could just see underneath it was the symbol of SHIELD and she knew that it was one of them.

"Lydia!" Pete's voice shocked her back to normal and he pushed her out of the way as bullets fired and he looked at her, seeing how pale she was. "Jesus, love, be more careful. I know you've been out of the game a bit, but if you don't focus, you'll get yourself killed."

"Pete," she said, a tremble in her voice. "It's not going to be me." He looked at her, not sure of what she was saying. "I saw the future, I know it. Don't ask me how I know, but one of us is going to die."

---



The cool night air softly blew against Sarah Bane's face as she ran across a spot of open ground. Muir Island was almost entirely covered with structures of one kind or another, but these areas of flat, open space were dotted across the island. A small amount of moonlight was all that lit her path as she had just disabled the facility's power generators. Being one of the best professional thieves in the United Kingdom, Sarah had plenty of experience in moving swiftly and exactly in the dark. Her next target wasn't far and the open ground let her stretch her legs.



**Pete  
Wisdom**

The slight breeze began to get some momentum behind it and she soon felt water droplets slap against her face. Stealing a quick look to the dark sky, she could see that a big storm was brewing...

"Bugger," she whispered to herself. "Have to step it up before I'm all soaked. Not that Pete would mind."



**Lydia  
Del Ruiz**

She readjusted the rucksack hanging over her one shoulder and picked up her pace. Inside of her backpack she had various equipment that a thief should never be without, as well as enough C4 to completely level several of the surrounding buildings.

Briskly jogging toward her next goal, a low hum slowly became audible as she reached the end of the open expanse of ground. Her ears perked up as she focused on the noise. Her acute senses weren't lying to her; there was definitely some type of electrical static emanating from a complex about a hundred meters east of her current position.

*Must have a backup generator, Sarah thought. Or maybe they're restoring power by rerouting it through that building. No matter. Either way it's about to go boom.*



**Theresa  
Rourke**

Heading toward the noise, she could begin to make out more sounds along with the humming. It sounded like metal was brushing against metal, and the sound of static quickly built up into larger electrical zaps.

Her senses told her no one was near the complex so she took the most direct route inside: through the front door. One well placed kick later she was standing inside a room almost as big as a football field. At the center of the room sat the source of all the noise she had been homing in on.

"Holy shit," was the first thing that could pass her lips.

A large platform, raised several meters off the floor, supported two giant metal spheres rotating around two large metal rings that were attached to the platform at the base. Electricity in its



**David  
North**



**Marcus  
Raven**



**Sarah  
Bane**

rawest form scurried along the metal rings, occasionally leaping out to connect with the circling floating spheres. It almost looked unreal, like it had popped out of a bad science fiction movie.

Sarah Bane dropped her pack in shock as her jaw nearly hit the floor. Reaching behind her back, she grabbed one of the communicators that Maverick had found on Brian Braddock's jet. The others needed to know about this.

"Someone respond," she said into the mouthpiece. "Pete! Come in. We've got a situation."

Static crackled across the communicator's speaker, possibly caused by the electrical interference of the large machine before her. After a moment that seemed to last an eternity, a voice broke through the static.

{{ - here, Sarah. What's going on? }} It was Peter Wisdom.

"Pete, thank God," she said. "I'm in a complex on the southeast part of the island. You'll never believe what I found in here. Get here as soon as you can, you need to see this to believe it."

{{ We're - zzz - route. What the devil are you going on about? }}

"I don't know what the bloody hell your girl Moira is thinking, but it's - KAA --"

Sarah's voice stalled as an involuntary gagging reaction forced itself on her. Her chest was burning and she couldn't pull oxygen into her lungs anymore. Shifting her focus down, she could see three silver prongs poking through her own body, stained with her own blood.

The communicator fell from her hands as her strength left her, Wisdom's voice chirping as it dropped. She couldn't make out his words. Her senses, which had once been the sharpest of just about anyone she had ever met, were now deadened as her life slipped away.

Pain overtook her again as three more prongs poked through her abdominal muscles as more blood dribbled out of her mouth.

Someone behind her pushed her forward and she fell to the cold ground in a bloody heap. Her vision faded and her mouth felt dry. The crimson color of her blood was barely visible against the dark red of her uniform, but there was no mistaking the large amount of it that had spilled.

Sarah Bane, the greatest thief in the United Kingdom, and member of the rogue team X-Force, was dying. Her assassin stood over her, not even bothering to wipe the blood off the two sais that had served to aerate Bane's body.

"Weapon Chi!"

The assassin turned at the sound of her name to see General Meyer walking over with several Byron Agency soldiers at his side.

"I see the dampener I equipped you with to get around Bane's hyper-senses worked like a charm," he quipped as he stood beside Weapon Chi, also known as Elektra. "Now go after the rest and kill 'em all."

Without even a verbal acknowledgment, Elektra turned and broke into a run, disappearing into the shadows.

Sarah limply rolled onto her side, desperate not to choke on the blood she was coughing up. One lung had been punctured for sure, and her other was probably damaged also. It was a struggle just to breathe.

"There's a storm brewing," Meyer commented casually. "But with your keen sense of whatever, I'm sure you knew that, right?" He chuckled softly as he leaned down close to Sarah.

"You...stupid git..." she managed to mutter.

"So I'm the stupid one?" Meyer rhetorically asked, standing up. "You and your friends are the ones who decided it would be fun to take on the Byrons. SHIELD practically abandons you, you've been marked as terrorists, every agency worth a damn has your photos taped to their walls, and I'm the stupid one? You walked right into us."

Sarah wanted to respond but she could only cough up more blood. Meyer shook his head as he pulled out his personal handgun from inside his large coat and pointed it at Sarah's head.

"Don't let anyone ever say I wasn't humane," Meyer said before squeezing the trigger.

The momentum of the bullet burrowing into her head caused Sarah to hit the ground hard, dead. Meyer turned to the small contingent of soldiers, slipping his weapon back into its holster.

"Fortify the area and put the rest of the troops on alert. We can't let X-Force know of the existence of Project: Deeper Mountain."

---

## THE TIES THAT BIND

### Part II: Through The Never

*Written by David Golightly (script)  
and Cory Wiegel (plot)*

---

"Bloody fucking hell!"

Peter Wisdom, former agent of SHIELD, dove behind the limited cover of a stack of metal crates. He knew swearing wouldn't really help anything, but it sure felt good.

"Sarah! Sarah, come in!" he continued to yell into his communicator. Small explosions and small weapons fire blanketed the surrounding terrain, but he could hear the speaker on his communicator clearly. There was no response.

The crates shifted slightly as someone else dove behind them. Ready to deliver a killing stroke, he turned, hot knives flaring to life in one hand, and found himself face to face with his teammate, Marcus Raven. The older man saw the energy knives out of the corner of his eye, but didn't react.

"Whoa there, Pete," Raven said. "It's just me, here to back you up."

Three quick shots from the assault pistol that Raven had liberated from a Byron agent tore through the air and plugged two of X-Force's enemies. The Byron lackeys went limp, making it that much easier for Raven to give them a telekinetic shove, sending their bodies flying into three more agents.

"Now then," Raven said in his rough voice, turning to face Wisdom. "What the hell is going on? Was that Sarah I heard over the squawk-box? Ah can't hear her thoughts. And what's wrong with Lydia?"

Lydia del Ruiz lay next to Wisdom, curled up in the fetal position, rubbing her temples and moaning in pain. She was breathing and appeared physically unharmed. Metaphysically, however, was another story.

"I'm not sure," Wisdom replied. "She said something about a vision and that one of us was going to die. Her head's been pounding too much for her to be of any use and now I can't get Sarah on the blasted walkie!"

"One of those days, eh?"

"Keep your cynicism to yourself this time, Marcus," Wisdom shot back. "We're in deep shit. Byrons are crawling all over, two of our own are down, and Moira has a lot to answer for."

Wisdom caught sight of another Byron soldier making his way to the crates. He fired five hot knives with deadly precision at the enemy, all of them landing on their mark. One energy blade dug into each appendage and the fifth cut deep into the center of the man's chest.

"I already told you she's playing both sides," said Raven.

"Still, we can't stay on the offensive like this. We need to regroup," Wisdom replied, then looked around and asked, "Where's Maverick and Terry?"

"Maverick charged head-on into a pile o' Byrons over yonder," Raven answered as he nodded his head in the appropriate direction. "Last Ah saw Terry she was--"

A piercing scream engulfed the area, forcing the group of soldiers that the attack was aimed at to drop their weapons and fall to their knees. Terry Rourke, also known as the mutant Siryn, swung low through the air and landed about thirty meters from Wisdom, Lydia, and Raven. They all had direct visual contact with each other but were pinned down from the fire of more Byron agents emerging from deeper within the complex. Worse, the increasing rainfall had made it harder for Siryn to maintain her altitude, so they were effectively stuck.

"Group chat session," Wisdom said as he readied another hot knife in one hand and cupped Lydia's face in the other.

"Come again?" Raven asked, raising a brow.

"Link us all up in a psi-web, dammit!" Wisdom barked. "We need to coordinate better or we'll never get out from behind these bloody crates!"

Marcus Raven, more nonchalant in a combat situation than some, picked off his brimmed hat and ran his fingers through his hair. Replacing the hat, Wisdom could see the concentration in his eyes as he forced the mental connection between the four members of X-Force left standing. There was no audible click as the connection was made, but it felt like there was a passage opened inside each of their minds.

*All right, good,* Wisdom thought at the others. *We all conscious?*

*Check,* thought Terry. *When do we get some answers?*

*Just a sec, a voice said. I'm almost done here.*

They each recognized the psychic voice that they "heard" in their heads as Maverick. The well-trained and well-experienced soldier had a voice that was unmistakable. It was a powerful and forceful voice that betrayed his age.

*Okay. Sorry about that, thought Maverick. One of these jokers was out of ammo and resorted to throwing bricks from debris at my head.*

*Everyone, listen up, Wisdom thought. Lydia's down and Sarah probably is, too. Her comm unit cut out and Marcus can't sense her. Maverick, you and I are going to find Sarah. The locator beacon on her communicator is still going, so as soon as you make your way over here we'll take off for it. Siryn, I need you to give us some cover. Just wham these gits with a few songs and keep them off our backs. Marcus, I need you to stay with Lydia. Protect her. Nothing's to happen to her, I mean it. Try and telepathically snap her out of her trance, too. She's going to have to run on her own two feet out of here by the looks of things.*

*Sure thing, Marcus thought into the psi-web he was generating. I can feel her consciousness poking through; it just needs a little massage. I'll need some cover, too, Terry. My concentration is going to pretty much be taken up with Lydia.*

*No problem, Terry responded. I'll just go full out and shatter their eardrums.*

*En route to your position, Maverick chimed in. About one minute. I've got some shaped-charges I took off a Byron here, Pete. Perfect for making a fancy entrance to wherever they're holding Sarah.*

*What makes you think they're detaining her?* Terry asked.

*Well, Maverick thought, this time with more power behind his words as if he were physically exerting himself. Marcus can't sense her so that means she's either being held behind a psychic-blocker or she's dead. Hope being what it is, that just leaves the first option.*

*Let's hope you're right, Wisdom commented. Break contact and follow the plan. Move, people!*

Raven lifted the psi-web just as Maverick burst through a large tent about two hundred meters north of the rest of the team. Several troops went flying from his explosive entrance and Maverick kept running, not losing any momentum.

Maverick's entrance into the main fight distracted the rest of the soldiers pinning the team down enough for Siryn to take to the sky once again, her vocal folds vibrating at a superhuman rate. Sonic waves poured over the soldiers, knocking them off balance as their equilibrium was thrown off.

Marcus took Lydia out of Wisdom's arms and into his own. The storm that had been merely brewing moments before was now coming down in sheets of rain. Thunder struck the clouds and lightning arced through the night.

Pete, with one last look down at the woman he hoped to marry, stood and ran to meet the pace of Maverick, who was already headed toward where Sarah Bane's locator was telling them her body was.

---

Blood stained the concrete floor of the research facility. Long streaks trailed behind Sarah Bane's motionless body as two Byron agents dragged her away.

"Tighten up your formation," hollered General Meyer across the room. "Weapon Chi's highly trained, but it's still possible that one of those freaks might slip past her. The experiment going on here is more important than any mission that any of you have ever been apart of! No one gets in or out of this building without my authorization!"

The armored soldiers Meyer had been directing his comments to nodded in acknowledgment. Several of them moved into standard defensive positions facing the entry points of the facility, a few of them close to Moira MacTaggart, who had just entered herself.

"Meyer, we need to talk," she said in her thick, Scottish accent. "Your goons escorting me here is unnecessary."

"For your safety, doctor."

"I'm more than safe from X-Force. You're the ones they're after."

"For my piece of mind then," Meyer said, motioning to the two soldiers walking on both sides of Moira. "Take her over behind the--"

"Oh my lord!" Moira called out suddenly, cutting Meyer off. She was close enough to the blood trail to now make out what it was and follow it to the body it was emanating from. "Is...is that Sarah Bane?"

"Yes, that was Sarah Bane," Meyer answered. "I assure you, she felt no pain."

"But... ye... she didn't deserve to die!" Moira stammered. "You monster! You out number them all by the dozens! You could have just detained her!"

"I admit her death may seem a bit needless," Meyer responded, "but if Weapon Chi fails in her mission we must guarantee that X-Force doesn't learn of Deeper Mountain. We can't afford another setback. This is war, doctor. Death is a part of that."

"You son of a bitch," Moira said, surprising herself in the anguish she felt. "Don't you realize what's going to happen? Marcus Raven, X-Force's telepath, will find out she's dead. That's if he hasn't already. Once he scans for her mind and discovers she's dead, he'll tell Wisdom and Wisdom won't rest until your head is on his mantle!"

"He's welcome to give it a try."

"Unbelievable," Moira said as she turned to leave. The tears beginning to form in her eyes stopped her from noticing the arm of her escort halting her progress and she bumped into it, surprised yet again.

"We need you here, doctor."

"You daft?" she said. "Let me pass. This is my island."

"The Byron Agency has relieved you of your position, doctor," Meyer explained. "The experiment must go on as planned, totally uninterrupted. We have a very small window of opportunity for this to go off without a hitch. If we want to breach this plane of existence and reach into the after-life, we cannot afford any mistakes. Like it or not, doc, you're staying here."

"What do you need me here for? This project wasn't my work," Moira insisted. "I barely know how the equipment works, at that! Why am I needed here?"

General Meyer didn't answer her with words, but rather with a devious smile.

---

**\* KRA-KOOM! \***

Wisps of smoke wafted through the air and bits of rubble rained down to the ground. Wisdom and Maverick stood in the newly

made hole on the west side of Muir Island's research facility.

"Lovely entrance," Wisdom said.

"I love me some explosives," Maverick deadpanned.

"Sarah's locator says she's in the area somewhere," Wisdom stated. "Spread out and move. Hold forma...oops, just a sec."

Wisdom fired off two hot knives that quickly imbedded themselves into the exposed throat of a Byron soldier. Blood curdled in the agent's esophagus before spilling out of his mouth. Shots rang out from behind the dead soldier as more troops piled into the large room that the X-Force members had just blown into.

"Screw the formation," said Maverick, cocking his weapon. "Let's kick some ass."

Ammunition poured out of Maverick's gun, blasting through crates, body armor, and flesh. He ran forward and leapt onto a table full of computer equipment. It didn't matter to him how expensive any of it cost as he kicked the equipment off the table, launching a piece of it into the face of a Byron soldier. That same soldier quickly received something else in his face: a bullet from Maverick's gun.

"Or we could do that," Wisdom said, sheepishly.

Maverick squatted on the table and sprung up into the air, catapulting him over the heads of three more soldiers. His weapons tore them apart easily as he volleyed over them and landed on his feet, steady as a rock.

Wisdom picked up a stray handgun that had scattered across the floor to his feet. Bullets began to ricochet all around him as the soldiers decided to take him down before he could act. Wisdom's SHIELD training kicked in and he began moving on pure instinct. Running low to the ground, he aimed his weapon with precision at the forehead of one of the soldiers trying to gun him down. One shot was all it took to splatter brains on the wall.

The rogue operative found a small amount of cover behind a support pillar as the opposition strafed their fire just behind his heels. Chunks of the pillar started to crumble away as the bullets chipped away at it. Checking his supply of ammunition, Wisdom guessed he had just enough to take the snipers out, but it would be close.

The bullets paused briefly, as the soldiers tried to quickly reload. Wisdom seized the opportunity and swung out from

behind the pillar, charging at the soldiers with everything he had. He fired shots as he ran toward them, some slamming into their body armor, others piercing their skulls. He took down three out of the four he was targeting by the time he got within ten meters of their position. He aimed and squeezed the trigger at the last Byron agent, but nothing happened. He was empty.

"Heh," the agent chuckled as he leveled his reloaded weapon at Wisdom. "What a time to run dry."

"I'm never dry," shot back Wisdom. His other hand seemingly slapped the air in front of him and the soldier's eyes went white. He went limp and slouched down, a hot knife beginning to cool off in his throat.

"Working on your one-liners?" asked Maverick.

Wisdom whipped around to see his teammate standing in front of a pile of either unconscious or dead soldiers, he couldn't tell which at this distance. He estimated at least seven of them.

"You can give me pointers when this is all over," Wisdom replied.

Maverick smirked and let go of a soldier he had been holding onto, who then fell on top of the pile. Wisdom raised his communicator to his face and motioned for Maverick to come over. The dark concrete reverberated the noise of Maverick's boots as he lumbered over.

"Siryn! We've got things covered in here so far. What's it like outside?"

{{ We've taken out and driven off just about all of them bastards, Petey, }} Siryn's voice said over the electronic connection. {{ Raven's still with Lydia, who is up and walking around on her own now. They're a little bit ahead of me and almost to your position. I'm cleaning up one last guy and then I'll be joining you. }}

"Thanks, Terry," said Wisdom. "Raven? You there?"

{{ Yep, }} said Marcus Raven. {{ Only took a few minutes to snap Lydia out of her trance. She's fine, albeit a bit woozy. We'll be right on top of you soon. }}

"He pick up anything else on Sarah?" Maverick asked, the concern in his voice showing.

"Any word on Sarah, Marcus?" Wisdom regurgitated.

{{ Hold on, I'll scan. }}

"Well?" Wisdom asked impatiently after a few moments of waiting.

{{ She is... well, this can't be right. }}

"What is it?"

{{ Her mind... Ah can feel it, but it's different. Like it's not on this plane of existence anymore. She's around here somewhere, but not in the physical sense. It's like she's dead, but she's not dead. I can feel her lingering – OW! Oh, goddammit! }}

Wisdom and Maverick shared a brief second of eye contact, confusion and worry spread across both of their faces.

"Raven? Marcus! Are you still there?"

{{ ...yeah. Ah'm here. Shit, that was not fun. }}

"What the hell just happened? Are you okay?"

{{ I got a quick uppercut to my psyche, that's what happened, }} Marcus retorted. {{ Ah think it was Moira. She's in a ton of pain; more than she's ever felt before. She's no telepath, so her thoughts are getting amplified somehow. Jesus, that hurt. }}

"Where is she?"

{{ Not far from you. Other side of the building, I'm guessing. }}

"Fine," Wisdom spat out, anger building up inside him. "Mav and I are moving out. Head for Moira. We're going to nail these bastards to the wall."

Wisdom reattached the communicator to his belt and signaled for Maverick to follow him. The two turned and started to run deeper into the complex, but searing pain quickly seized Wisdom's right leg, causing him to falter in his stride and collapse to the ground.

Maverick shifted his weight so he turned right back around and could see what was happening. Wisdom was down on one knee, a gash in his leg. The cut looked deep. The highly trained soldier who had been through several wars, both public and secret ones, did not like what he saw. It put more than a slight fear in his soul. Resting at Wisdom's feet was the cause of his wound: a long, metal sai.

The leader of X-Force summoned two hot knives to fire at his assailant, but another sai sliced into his arm, now imbedded in

his flesh. The white hot energy died suddenly and Wisdom cried out in pain.

Maverick ran back and jumped in front of his partner, using himself as a human shield. He leveled his gun at the attacker, Weapon Chi. Maverick squeezed off a couple shots, but missed. Elektra dodged the attack easily, moving like water in a series of fluid, yet complex, motions. In mere seconds the assassin was in front of Maverick.

*Jesus, she's fast,* thought Maverick. *Have to kick it up a notch here. She keeps moving like that and it won't matter how much of an impact I can absorb.*

Maverick tried to use the butt of his weapon like a club, but Elektra was too quick for him. She backhanded his fist away and followed through the motion, using the momentum to land a kick to his head.

Both X-Force members were down on their knees and Weapon Chi was just getting started. Her eyes were emotionless and in that moment the two knew that there would be no reasoning with her...

---

**TO BE CONTINUED...**

---

## **FORCING THE ISSUE**

Whelp, that's X-Force #7, the first issue in the final stretch for this book. There's quite a bit of history that's gone into this issue coming out, most of which is public knowledge.

It's hard for a writer to leave a book behind, especially a book like X-Force. David Wheatley made the decision he felt he had to and as a result, left behind a pack of characters he obviously felt close to. Cory and I have put a lot of work into wrapping Wheatley's run on X-Force and we've also become fond of these characters. Hopefully, someone will see fit to rescue them from Limbo once we finish up X-Force.

Anyways, I've been having a great time scripting Cory's plots. I'm American, so I'm trying not to make everyone sound like me. The English characters talk the way real English people do, and Terry and Moira sort of have a dialect thing going, too... at least that's what I intended. Who knows? It may not have come across like I had hoped, but it sure was fun trying. Am I rambling? Hah, anyway...

Hope you enjoyed the issue. I loved writing it.

-D. Golightly  
6/27/06

---



Moira MacTaggart pulled against her restraints, but it was all for naught. The bonds were too tight and she simply didn't have the strength to break free. In fact, what little strength she did possess was sapped by the gravity of her current predicament.

"We're just about ready to begin, doctor," said Meyer.



**Pete  
Wisdom**

Moira was strapped into the center of the large device that Meyer was so desperate to keep X-Force away from. The orbs were slowly circling her and electricity continued to spike off the metal and lash out at her.

"You've gone off the deep end, General," said Moira. "Sean will find out about this and then more than your career will be over, you perverted bastard!"



**Lydia  
Del Ruiz**

"Sean? You mean Sean Cassidy?" Meyer asked, his one eyebrow raised. "Our esteemed Head of Special Operations? Of the Byron Agency?" Meyer continued to ask, rhetorically and sadistically. "Didn't you know? He's the one who authorized this. He knows *exactly* what we're doing with you!"

"He wouldn't sign off on this," Moira protested. "Sean Cassidy has been a friend of mine for years. Lying isn't your strong point, General."



**Theresa  
Rourke**

"Oh, but he did sign off on this. Personally," Meyer insisted. "He said the words directly to my face. The Byron Agency doesn't take kindly to moles in our organization. Yes, we know you thought you were playing us for fools so your mutant friends could gain access to our intel, but it was us who manipulated you into letting us on this little island of yours," Meyer explained. "And Sean Cassidy is the one who told us to use you as our guinea pig for our little experiment today."

"My lord... I can't believe..."



**David  
North**

"Start the procedure," Meyer said before turning back to face Moira from his spot on the floor. "Believe it. Why would I lie?"

The orbs started to spin faster and faster around Moira. Blue energy sparked off of the giant machine and arced across her field of vision. She began to feel like she was being tugged inside of her restraints, but not in a physical sense. She couldn't quite explain it, but it felt like something was pulling at her very soul from the inside of her body.

Just as quickly as the pain started, it began to fade away. Moira let out the breath she didn't realize she had been holding in. The pressure was much lighter now and she could open her eyes. She could see that the orbs circling her had slowed and



**Marcus  
Raven**



**Sarah  
Bane**

were almost stopped completely. They then started to vibrate slightly, as if something were forcing them to contain more energy than they were meant to handle.

"What's happening?" shouted Meyer over the noise of the machine. "Did you fuck this up? Give me some answers, soldier!"

"No, sir!" the technician answered. "Something is interfering with the equipment. It's functioning, but not like it's supposed to. We're only getting a partial breach. The energy is feeding back into the orbs, sir!"

The unmistakable noise of gunfire reached Meyer's ears and he turned away from the console to face the source. The hallway leading to the large room they were currently in spilled a small amount of light out. It was just enough for Meyer to see shadows of full-grown men getting tossed around like rag dolls.

"Double up the guard on the entrance!" Meyer ordered. "We've got incoming!"

Several squads rushed to the hallway to obey their general's order. No sooner had they reached the end of the hall than a sonic cry rippled across their bodies, amplified slightly by the narrow passage. All of the soldiers flew back several meters before hitting the ground hard.

Siryn, Raven, and Lydia all came charging out of the hallway and into the large room. They each paused for a moment, shocked at the sight of Moira strapped into a giant device, reminiscent of a scene from a James Bond movie.

"Help!" cried Moira upon seeing X-Force rush in. She almost sounded, silly but this wasn't a time to worry about things like that. "Get me out of this bloody thing!"

The three X-Force members jumped into action, quickly taking down as many soldiers as they could while making their way across the room. The soldiers retaliated, but were no match for the ferocity of the three outlaws. General Meyer could tell that in moments X-Force would be standing in front of him.

"Keep the experiment going - that's an order!" Meyer said to the technician. "Abandon your post and I'll shoot you myself!"

Meyer turned away before the technician could respond. He had had enough of X-Force. Too much was at stake for these terrorists to barge in now. He wouldn't stand idly by and allow his hard work to go completely to shit. Swallowing his anger, Meyer relaxed his arms so his long coat fell to the floor, revealing a shiny exoskeleton that covered his entire body up to

his neck. He took a deep breathe and clenched both his fists, activating the suit. Crimson energy spread over his body, a slight hum now emitting from the exoskeleton.

General Meyer, who had seen more combat action than most of the Byron agents in the room combined, took off at full speed for the enemy closest to him: Marcus Raven.

---

## **THE TIES THAT BIND**

### **Part III: Mortality Redefined**

*Written by David Golightly (script)  
and Cory Wiegel (plot)*

---

Pain reeled through Maverick's body as he was forced back from Weapon Chi's brutal assault. His powers allowed him to absorb most of the impact, but Elektra was well-trained. She knew just where to hit him so his powers only eased the pain. Knowing pressure points was like second nature to an assassin.

"Could use some -argh!- help here, Peter," Maverick said through gritted teeth.

Maverick heard Wisdom let out a murmur of pain from behind him. Chancing a look over his shoulder, he saw blood seeping out of Wisdom's arm from where he just pulled out Elektra's sai. It looked like it hurt. A lot.

The small distraction proved enough for Weapon Chi to land a kick to Maverick's solar plexus and grab his outstretched arm. The assassin shifted her weight and tossed him over her hip, sending him face-first into the concrete with a perfectly executed Judo maneuver. He tucked his body slightly at the last second, which probably was the only thing that saved his neck from snapping.

From his position on the floor, Maverick gazed up at Elektra, who was preparing to stomp down on his face with her red boot. Her own face remained totally emotionless, as if she had no feelings whatsoever about murdering someone.

She raised her heel, ready to crush Maverick's head beneath it. Suddenly, a steel sai went flying passed her head, and for the first time, she showed an emotion: surprise. Maverick didn't hesitate in taking advantage of her distraction like she had done to him moments before. From the floor, he pivoted on his hip and swung his left leg out to catch her feet and push her off balance. He connected, but didn't knock her over. He wasn't really sure how she did it, but she sort of moved with the hit

and he only succeeded in moving her away from him.

At least a dozen hot knives pierced the air around Elektra, the majority of which hit her in the chest. She was pushed back further by the assault, giving Maverick enough room to flip up onto his feet. The mutant soldier charged the assassin, plowing his fist into her face. She rolled with that punch, too, but not nearly as much as she had past ones. Wisdom's hot knives had dazed her.

"Fall over, already!" Maverick yelled as he gave her yet another uppercut.

Ducking to the side and dodging another of Maverick's punches, Weapon Chi caught his arm with her left hand, holding it steady. With her remaining hand, she shoved the palm of her fist into Maverick's nose, breaking it instantly. Blood dribbled out of the orifice, silently dripping on the floor. Without hesitation, Elektra used the same hand to hit Maverick's caught arm at a lateral angle, snapping it in two places. Maverick cried out in both shock and pain as Elektra proceeded to flip him onto the ground once again.

"Your number's up, luv," Wisdom hollered from somewhere behind Elektra. "You're tough, I'll give you that. But you've got no real motivation anymore. I saw it in your eyes. You're just running on autopilot and that's going to be your downfall."

Suddenly, a stream of solid, white hot energy wrapped itself around Weapon Chi's throat, a small amount of steam rising up from where it touched her sweat. Her nerve endings sizzled where the energy thread rubbed against her skin, causing her neck muscles to tighten. She found it harder to breathe and she squealed just a bit. It was the first sound to pass through her lips in longer than she could remember.

"You see," said Wisdom, his level of concentration showing in his voice, "if I focus hard enough, I can make my mutant power form more than just energy shards. Take this hot whip for instance. You've felt my knives, so you know how they sting... But just imagine this whip being in direct contact with your skin for a prolonged period of time. It's like you're getting a tan and the sun is right on top of you."

Weapon Chi buckled against Wisdom's grip but he didn't let go. He clenched his teeth and doubled his concentration. Bullets of sweat poured down his face; it took all he had to maintain the hot whip. Sensing that Elektra might snap free, he quickly closed the distance between them to get better leverage and then kicked her hard in the kidneys.

"It's...been fun," said Wisdom. "Maybe we'll have this dance

again sometime.”

Yanking hard on the whip, Wisdom forced Elektra to stumble backwards with him over to a window. A few meters from the opening, he used all of his strength to hoist her off the ground and fling her over his back and out the window. The hot whip dissipated as Elektra sailed through the night’s air, the rain pelting her all the way down. At the base of the island a few hundred feet down rested several rocks, the edges dulled by the waves viciously lapping against them over the years. Elektra struck one with a loud crack and disappeared beneath the waves.

“Your one-liners are coming along better,” Maverick said.

Wisdom turned around and quickly moved over to his teammate to help him to his feet. The damage Maverick had was severe: a broken arm, probably a broken rib or three, bruises, possibly internal bleeding...he didn’t look very good. Despite it all, Maverick stood up tall once Wisdom helped him up and didn’t limp when he walked to the window.

“Think she’s dead?” he asked.

“Are they ever?” Wisdom responded.

“Right,” Maverick blurted out, a soft chuckle under the word. “So, what next, fearless leader?”

“Moirra and the others. Then we shut the place down in a very loud and fiery way.”

Maverick stole one last glance out the window to Weapon Chi’s newly christened grave. As a man who had killed more than his fair share of opponents over the years, he felt no guilt whatsoever over the death of an enemy. Elektra, while seemingly not of her own mind and a one time alley, didn’t pull at Maverick’s conscience one bit.

The only thing he felt for her was pity.

---

The crimson energy of General Meyer’s suit condensed itself into a personal force field, granting Meyer limited strength and enough protection to repel just about anything X-Force could throw at him. Not that the trio wasn’t trying their hardest. Marcus Raven had been the first to fall at Meyer’s feet, his telekinetic blasts simply washing over the veteran.

“There’s always someone like you!” Lydia said as she aimed a kick at the General’s head.

Lydia del Ruiz wasn't fairing much better than Raven. Her mutant ability to absorb sunlight and convert it to increased strength, agility, and stamina wasn't doing her much good at night. The reserves she had built up had seemed to be depleted while she was recovering from her "psychic episode."

"Call yourself a revolutionist, an insurrectionist, or even a futurist," she hollered, rolling along the ground to avoid Meyer's sledgehammer fists. "The truth is you're a dime-a-dozen. I can't swing a dead cat without hitting one of you assholes!"

"None of those descriptions fit me at all!" Meyer replied. He leaped forward to try and catch Lydia in a scissors kick but she did a back hand-spring that cleared her of his legs. "I'm merely a soldier doing his duty. Mankind is making giant steps forward every day as far as technology goes, and the Byron Agency plans to be there to take mankind further. We'll be the ones to break through into the other side and learn the secrets stored there, the secrets of immortality! Once we do that, we'll be another step closer to taking this world to new heights, a world that's spiraling down so fast that we can't see the top of the well anymore."

"Sugar coat it all you want, but you're not doing this for anyone but yourself!" Lydia said.

Meyer didn't get angry at Lydia's accusation, he just smirked. His soldiers, since he had joined the brawl, were slowly gaining ground on X-Force. A few more shoves and the rogue team wouldn't be able to stand on their own feet anymore. This "witty" banter was just a way of stalling until her teammates showed up to save the day.

"How do you like the suit? It's a prototype of a design that we stole from SHIELD," Meyer explained. "I'm sure you've noticed the increased strength and energy shield, but check out this little feature. I think you'll really like it."

Meyer raised his arms together and focused the force field surrounding his suit. Pressing the palms together sent a signal to quickly build up a small amount of power and release it in one big burst. The red energy flashed across Lydia's face and she flew back into the wall, her spine twisting at an odd angle when she hit the ground. As soon as she felt the impact she knew she had slipped a disc in her lower back. Walking was going to be a painful adventure.

"Ahhhh!" screamed Moira on the other side of the room. "What's going on? Oh lord, it burns!"

Meyer, satisfied Lydia was down for the count, turned back to

look at the technician desperately trying to get the large machine working how it was supposed to. At the center of the madness, Moira still stood strapped to the device, a look of pure terror draped across her face.

The two orbs floating around her had finally returned to their appropriate paths, albeit a bit slowly. The change in velocity this time, however, was to be expected. The two orbs began to open slightly as they spiraled closer to Moira. Inside each of them she could see a swirl of images that blended together. It looked as if she could reach a hand through and grasp whatever was on the other side. As the two orbs drew closer, the tugging sensation in the pit of Moira's stomach grew stronger.

"Don't ya worry," Siryn cried as she took to the air once again. "I'll toss that thing on its ear and have you out of there right quick."

Siryn sent a shrill sonic blast at some nearby soldiers as she swooped in toward the large platform, bowling them over. She was almost able to touch down next to Moira when she was knocked down by another of Meyer's crimson energy blasts. He had hit her square in the back and ripped off part of her uniform. Several severe lacerations graced her lower back where the energy had scraped against her skin, the blood beginning to flow freely. It was all she could do not to pass out.

"Like shooting a very large pigeon out of the sky," said Meyer, the satisfaction in his voice showing.

Just as Meyer was about to launch another blast at the now helpless Siryn, a powerful force slammed into his side and caught him off balance. He tumbled head over heels before springing back to his feet to eye up the source of his trouble: Maverick.

"I've got a lot of payback to deliver to you," Maverick sneered.

The General met Maverick's gaze and charged his enemy while letting out a primal battle cry. Maverick accepted the unspoken challenge and caught Meyer's fists in the air, pushing against them. The crimson energy of Meyer's exoskeleton washed over Maverick's body but didn't cause him to so much as a twitch. The two-handed arm-wrestling match continued with neither opponent showing giving or gaining any ground.

"I'm gonna fry you, mutant!" Meyer said between his gritted teeth.

"I would say to give it your best shot, but something tells me you already are," Maverick replied. "You call me a mutant like it's an insult, but right now my mutant power is keeping me on

the same level with your fancy suit. You're probably maxing out your power supply and I'm just getting warmed up."

It was true. Meyer was pouring all the power his suit gave him into his struggle with Maverick. Sweat was beginning to bead on his brow but he refused to give up. He wouldn't allow anyone to stop him; he was passed the point of no return.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a bluish blur streak passed behind Maverick. It was Wisdom, heading straight for Moira MacTaggart.

"Stop him!" Meyer yelled back over his shoulder. "Stop Wisdom! Concentrate your fire on him! Don't let him reach the machine!"

The two technicians manning the console turned just in time to see two hot knives fly into their chests. They both fell to the ground, immobile. Moira called out a warning to Wisdom to take cover. As he ducked behind a pair of large generators, bullets seemingly rained down all around him.

Wisdom swore, quickly formulating a plan to take down the remaining soldiers and reach Moira on the elevated platform. Before he could figure the whole situation out, however, the gunfire paused and then sounded like it changed targets. Peeking over the generators, Wisdom saw the reason the troops had decided to start firing at a more immediate target. Lydia had flanked the group and taken down at least half of their number using two assault rifles, one in each hand. Her face was bruised badly and dried blood was crackling around her lips, but she was holding her own in the firefight.

"Bless you, luv," Wisdom whispered as he leapt onto the large platform.

Wisdom reached Moira with just three spaced steps and began pulling at her restraints, readying a hot knife to cut them off.

"This thing feels like it's tearing off my bloody appendages!" Moira whimpered. The struggle against whatever force was prodding her had taxed her emotions greatly.

"Don't worry, you'll be free in just a tick. Then we'll all jump ship and --"

Wisdom's mouth opened but no sound came out. His face went pale and his body began to glow the same color as the radiating energy from the floating orbs. The orbs had floated close enough to Wisdom that the energy had lashed out from one of them and struck his back.

His vision began to blur. Moira's face blended in with the background. It was as if someone had taken the three-dimensional world and crushed into just two dimensions. Color swirled all around him and then deadened into grey and white hues. The blur that used to be Moira smeared away and was replaced with an empty void.

Then, just as fast as the burning sensation in the back of his mind had started, it stopped. All the blurs snapped back into perfect clarity but the colors remained dimmed with grey and white, like someone had adjusted the television settings. He looked up to see that he had fallen over onto the platform and Moira was screaming at him, but he couldn't hear her. In fact, on closer inspection, she didn't look like she was actually looking at him. It was hard to tell because she had slowed down and her head was bobbing. Stepping back and taking in the whole machine she was tied to, she wasn't the only thing that had slowed down. The floating orbs were barely moving and the energy arcing off the metal was almost frozen in place.

"Peter....Pete...I'm over here..."

The voice was soft and distant. He wasn't quite sure where it was coming from. Looking beyond Moira and the platform for the first time, Wisdom saw that there wasn't much anything else. Just an empty nothingness.

"Peter...turn around..."

Following the voice, the rogue operative turned to see a shocking sight. Standing right behind him, yet looking just as distant, was the last person he expected to see at that moment. Sarah Bane.

"Sarah? But, I thought--"

"We haven't much time, Pete. Just listen."

Wisdom nodded. He wasn't totally sure he actually understood what was happening but he believed Sarah that he didn't have a lot of time. It was par for the course, after all. He trusted Sarah.

"This place, Peter. You shouldn't be here. You can't stay, you need to go back. Destroy the machine, save Moira, stop the Byrons. I would say it's not your time or some rubbish like that, but you would just roll your eyes, wouldn't you?"

He wanted to laugh or smile or say something clever...but he couldn't. He started to realize where this place actually was. He didn't like the thought.

"Hell? Heaven?" Sarah said, her eyebrows raised. "No, Peter. Not exactly. And yes I just heard your thoughts. You see, when in this place, thoughts and speech work differently. We're on another plane of existence. It's why Marcus was able to pick up Moira's pain so easily. This place, this realm, functions differently."

"Is that how Lydia had her vision? Was it you sending her a message?"

"No. That wasn't me. It was them."

Sarah pointed off into the void to a small floating rock. Wisdom could make out a single figure holding a tiny child. It was Elektra and he had a good idea of who the baby was.

"It was a way for them to ensure you could get to the machine. You have to destroy it, Peter."

"Come back with me," Wisdom pleaded. "We need you with us. You shouldn't have to stay here."

"I can't," she responded. Her voice was bitter and cold. "My body...they hurt it too much. I'm trapped here in this...this living death."

"But if I destroy the machine we definitely won't have any way of bringing you back."

"My body is too damaged and enough time has passed for anything to be done by it. Modern medical science is advanced but not advanced enough. Look, Peter, we're running out of time here. In this place I've able to halt the machine and keep the Byrons out of here. But it's like tensing a muscle and I can't hold it forever. You have to go now."

"What do I do?"

"Concentrate and focus your will. Wake yourself up like you would in a bad dream."

"Okay," Wisdom nodded in understanding. "Sarah...I..."

"I know, Peter. We've known each other a long time. So don't say goodbye. Just...don't tell Lydia about this."

Before Wisdom could figure out her words, Sarah moved in close to him and kissed him passionately. It was a weird experience as their surroundings affected the way a person perceives physical contact. But it was not an unpleasant experience.

The kiss faded away as did the realm and Wisdom opened his eyes to find himself staring up from the floor, Moira screaming at him, still strapped to the machine. Gunfire echoed around him, snapping his attention back to the matter at hand. He had a job to do.

"Relax, Moira," he said. "I'll cut those restraints off. When I do you need to run out of here as fast as you can. Can you do that? Can you run?"

"Aye."

Wisdom created a longer version of his patented hot knives and easily sliced through the bonds. Moira fell forward into his arms and then stood upright, the day's events obviously taking their toll on the woman. Their eyes met briefly before Moira slid off the platform and made her way to the door.

Stray weapons fire was still ricocheting all around her, but the rest of X-Force was keeping the Byrons occupied enough for Moira to make her exit. Maverick had tossed Meyer through one of the generators supporting the large machine and even though it was enough to stop the General, the machine still lumbered on.

Wisdom backed up on the platform to take in the whole contraption. Sarah, Elektra, and the baby would never be brought back if he did what he had to do. He swallowed the lump in his throat, took a deep breathe, and charged up several hot knives. His personal thoughts and feelings shouldn't interfere with what he had to do.

Again and again he tossed the hot knives into the machinery. The rings, the computers, the orbs, even the restraints that had held Moira, all of them were quickly stabbed with the energy projectiles. Sparks flew and the orbs fell to the platform. The loud screeching noise that almost deafened Wisdom was the heavy metal bending and collapsing on itself.

"No!" cried Meyer as he pulled himself out from inside the generator. "Stop!"

Meyer tried to fire at Wisdom using his exoskeleton's ranged attack, but when he struck his palms together, nothing happened. Maverick had damaged the suit too badly.

Wisdom leapt down off the platform as the giant metal rings fell over, rocking the whole platform off its base. The machine was destroyed. Meyer was finished. Wisdom eyed up the General and began walking over to where he kneeled, bloodlust in his eyes.

"You son of a bitch!" swore Meyer. "I swear to God you'll pay for this. I'll make sure you never breathe fresh air again because I'm going to tear out your throat with my own hands!"

Peter Wisdom had no witty come back, no clever one-liner, no banter at all...his eyes spoke volumes and it chilled Meyer.

"Your day is coming, mutant. Everyone fall back and retreat!" Meyer slapped a switch on his chest and his suit began to glow a bright red, more vibrant than the crimson energy of his suit from before. As Wisdom rushed forward to grab at Meyer, the General faded from view and disappeared in a brilliant, red flash of light.

"Peter!"

Wisdom turned to face the direction Siryn's voice had come from to see her being supported by Marcus Raven with Maverick walking beside them. All of the Byron agents were gone, even the dead and unconscious ones, probably teleported to the same place Meyer had ran off to. Bullet holes lined the walls and drying blood dotted the concrete floor.

"Peter, I saw Moira get out okay," said Siryn.

"Yeah. She'll be fine. It looked like she just had some bruising."

"What the hell happened up there?" asked Marcus. "For a minute your mind was coming over sharp as a thumbtack. Like you tapped into something."

Wisdom didn't answer their questions. He just didn't have the emotion strength left. He would tell them later, of course, but not right now. Right now, he needed to get out of that godforsaken place.

He reached into his uniform, pulled out a cigarette, and went to light it. Just as the flame was about to ignite the tip of his smoke, he pulled back. Pulling the cigarette out of his mouth, he eyed it up and then tossed it on the floor. Meeting the questioning gazes of his teammates, he brushed passed them and headed for the exit.

---

A few days later, Terry and Marcus were helping to load some supplies onto their borrowed aircraft, the Midnight Runner. Terry couldn't help but see the irony in taking the supplies from Moira. They had come here suspecting her, then thought she was totally guilty, then found out she was actually sort of helping them, and now she was supplying them with equipment they desperately needed for their mission.

*Eye of the beholder and all that, she thought to herself.*

Siryne also couldn't help but notice how much better Muir Island as a whole now looked. When Meyer and his troops all teleported out a few days earlier it seemed like the entire facility had gotten a facelift. Even Moira was perky and friendly.

"I want to thank ye again for staying on and helping clean up the mess," Moira said behind Terry.

"Thank you for letting us stay and lick our wounds," she replied.

The two women smiled at each other and finished moving the rest of the supplies in silence. Marcus had a similar demeanor. He had questions and things he wanted to discuss with Terry, but he knew that now wasn't the time. The last few days had been enough to wear down all of their emotions; he didn't want to spoil a pleasant moment for his friends.

He couldn't help his own mind from wandering however. Wisdom had finally told them of Sarah's death. Add that with the physical damage done to the team, Elektra's missing body, Meyer's whereabouts, and what Pete had described from being on the other side... the team still had a lot to worry about.

"About ready there, Marcus?" Maverick called out. He and Lydia were exiting the hanger bay to the launch pad where Marcus, Moira, and Terry were all putting the finishing touches on the Midnight Runner. His arm was covered in a metallic cast that not only supported the appendage, but allowed it to bend and flex like normal, as to not be totally useless while it healed.

"Things all are loaded up and the ship's had a full diagnostic," he answered. "We're ready to leave."

"It's time we left then," Lydia said as they approached the rest of the group. "Thanks again, Moira. We appreciate all the help you've given us. You're a good hostess."

"Think nothing of it. Just come visit again under better circumstances."

"Where's Peter?" Maverick broke in, looking around. "I haven't seen him for hours."

"I don't know for sure," Lydia responded with a sigh. "But I have an idea."

---

On a ridge overlooking the entire Muir Island facility, Peter

Wisdom stood in front of a makeshift tombstone with Sarah's full name carved into it. While the island rested at sea level, the ridge was high enough that the moisture got caught around the higher altitude. A slight fog rolled across the ground at Wisdom's feet, almost covering the tombstone.

"I wish I could have given you a better funeral," Wisdom spoke. "We're wanted fugitives for now and since we don't have many allies who can openly claim us, this will have to do. Don't think this is permanent, though. I'll come back and give you a proper burial as soon as I can. You deserve that at the very least."

The leaves rustled a bit behind him and he knew it wasn't just the wind kicking up. He had thought to bring the others here with him, but he wanted a moment alone to say the things he felt he needed to.

"We have to get going, Peter," said Lydia, Peter's fiancé.

Wisdom nodded in understanding. He hated to leave in this fashion, but he knew there wasn't much of a choice. Meyer was still out there, hunting them. They shouldn't have even stayed at Muir Island for this long. They had to get moving.

"Goodbye, Sarah," Peter whispered.

Wisdom turned and took Lydia's hand. The couple walked back down the steep ridge to join the rest of X-Force. The fog rippled around Sarah Bane's grave as Peter took Lydia's hand in his own, leaving Sarah to rest in peace while they would continue to fight.

---

## THE END

---

### FORCING THE ISSUE

Well, I'm sure all of you have taken notice by now: neither of us are David Wheatley. He's stepped down from X-Force after some disagreements about his future plans for the title and that was unfortunate, but I'd like to leave it at that for now and discuss D. Golightly and I's wrap-up arc of David's remaining plots.

David Wheatley's a tough cookie to follow when it comes right down to it. I went back and read through his six most recent issues so that I could better plot out the conclusion of his plots, and I ended up counting over twenty two loose story threads! That's how David writes and it works when he's the one to tie

all of those threads together over the course of a large run. Hell, I'd like to dedicate a good seven or eight issues to wrapping up everything, but that's not practical and we've decided that three issues will have to do it. D. Golightly and I may not be able to cover everything, but we'll hit the high points and do it with as much respect to David's run as we can.

A few of the things we'll be doing will be at David's request in case any of you see something that makes you wonder, "why would they do that?" However, for the most part, this story is all D. Golightly and I's. We've had a lot of fun with this first issue and the next two should be a blast as well. You can all expect to see more from General Meyer as he's tasked to bring down X-Force, Brian Braddock as he tries to aid in the take down of the Byron Agency, and Nick Fury as the United Nation's review of SHIELD is finalized. Plus, X-Force busts some heads! We hope everyone enjoys the ride.

- Cory Wiegel  
June 27th, 2006

---



Darkness was all he could really see. He had been in this room only a handful of times before, and each experience had been more uncomfortable than the last. A single spotlight casting down directly on him was the only illumination in the room, and it blinded him so that everything else was nearly just a dark blur.



**Pete  
Wisdom**

He heard a door open on his right side and footsteps shuffle across the concrete floor. He knew it was six people altogether and he knew who they were and what they were going to do.

"If I may, gentlemen," he began but one of the other people who had just entered the room cut him off.

"Quiet, General. This is not a hearing so you have no reason to speak in your defense," the person stated curtly as he took his seat. "I call this meeting of the Hierarchy to order. We're here to discuss the recent failure of Project: Deeper Mountain and the escape of X-Force. Comments?"



**Lydia  
Del Ruiz**

"We have all been briefed on the defection of Moira MacTaggart," said another voice from the darkness as the noises of chairs being moved around stopped. "Cassidy should never have brought her in from the beginning. I advised him it would be a wasted effort and I was--"



**Theresa  
Rourke**

"MacTaggart is of no concern to us anymore," a third voice abruptly cut in. "She is useless and applying our resources to punish her would only be met with more casualties as our esteemed General Meyer here proved."

General Meyer blinked as the bright light continued to halt his vision. He looked at the floor, slightly ashamed that he was in this position. X-Force had humiliated him on Muir Island and despite his best efforts he had been forced to retreat. All the planning had been wasted. Moira was freed, the project had been destroyed, Weapon Chi was gone, some of their soldiers were dead, and X-Force had evaded capture.

"Regardless," replied the other voice, "if Cassidy hadn't put so much stock in the Muir Island operation we wouldn't have been set back as much as we have."



**David  
North**

"I agree," piped in another mysterious voice. "Meyer can be held responsible for the debacle that was Project: Deeper Mountain, but so can Cassidy."

"General Meyer," said the central voice. "We will give you one last chance to redeem yourself both in your own eyes and the Hierarchy's. You should realize this chance is only being offered because of your resourcefulness in rooting out G.W. Bridge and



**Marcus  
Raven**

having him disposed of before he could contact SHIELD. His knowledge of the Byron Agency could have crippled our operations, but it was you who was able to stop him. Because of this, we'll grant you an opportunity to gain back our confidence in you."

Meyer felt his feet stiffen and his back straighten when he heard this. He wasn't quite sure what to expect from this... meeting. Things may actually work out in his favor, however, and that's all that mattered.

"I'll gladly take that opportunity, sir," Meyer replied with a steady nod. "What is the next project you wish me to take on?"

"We want you to destroy X-Force once and for all."

---

## **DISPOSABLE HEROES**

### **Part I: Bringing Down The House**

*Written by David Golightly (script)  
and Cory Wiegel (plot)*

---

They say that rain is sometimes an omen, hinting at dark and foreboding times in the near future. Brian Braddock had long ago dismissed such nonsense. After all of his adventures both in this world and various others he had come to realize that life is what you make of it. While one person would look at the foreboding sky over his head and see misery another person might see the primal forces of nature and the essence of life within them. Brian liked to think the glass was half full.

Despite the rain, Brian had decided to venture down to one of his favorite pubs in Westminster. He had been working around the clock since being contacted by Peter Wisdom, leader of the rogue mutant team called X-Force. Using his political connections, Brian had been trying to dig up as much information as was available on the Byron Agency. However, recent events concerning the Byrons had put Wisdom in a rather perturbed mood. He demanded to know whatever he could about the organization, including the identities of their more prominent leaders.

"Punching Juggernaut through a wall seemed easier than digging up classified intel," Brian muttered to himself. After only two drinks at the pub he had decided to head home to his wife. She would be able to relax him better than any bar could.

Brian tried to figure out his next move during the wet walk. His

trenchcoat offered little protection from the falling moisture, even with the collar popped up and his hands shoved way down into the pockets. He had already extinguished most of his usual sources of information, which meant he now he to start asking questions of people that held no favor for him in exchange for a favor or two from him. It would not be a fun task.

"Excuse me, Mr. Braddock," a thick Russian voice said from behind him. Brian halted and turned around to see a sterling white limousine pulled up to the curb just behind his heels. Leaning out of the back window was a dark-haired man who was staring at Brian. "Lovely evening for a walk, no?" he added with a grin.

"Do I know you?" Brian asked cautiously.

"*Nyet*," the Russian answered. "But I do know of you asking many questions as of late. Questions that I, Colonel-General Valentin Shalatov, have answers to. Please sit with me out of the rain. We can help each other, I think."

"You in the habit of picking up total strangers like this?" Brian mused. "Trustworthy guy."

The Russian blurted out a deep chuckle. His eyes were still fixated on Brian but there was no malice in them. His face bore a mask of curiosity more than anything else. As suspicious as the scene may have looked, Brian wasn't sure the Russian would try to cause him any harm. Even if he did it wouldn't be very easy, anyway.

"My habits include gathering information," he replied with a smile. "Information you have been inquiring about. Please, Mr. Braddock, come out of the rain."

"I'll give you five minutes," Brian said to the delight of Shalatov. The door opened and Brian slid in beside the Russian, who smelled distinctly like vodka.

"Might I offer you a drink?" he asked, reaching for two glasses before Brian could answer. "I personally find your country's vodka revolting, but my palette has been screaming at me ever since I arrived, so I must make do."

"No thank you," Brian answered with the wave of his hand. "Why don't you tell me a little more about the exact reason behind your visit."

"Ha! Direct, are we?" the Russian said with a smirk. "Very well." Shalatov threw back the rest of his drink and quickly poured himself another, seemingly unfazed by its affects. "Mr. Braddock, the Byron Agency isn't typically accustomed to being

sought after. As you probably already know, they like to keep to themselves about certain aspects of their operation."

"And what do *you* know about the Byrons that I don't?"

"More than the people you've been asking questions to," he replied smugly. "Officially, they are a collection of security firms the world over, contracting themselves out to various super power governments. Unofficially, they are the ultimate puppet masters, manipulating those same governments to meet their own ends."

"How does telling me what I already know benefit me in any way? If this is all you came to tell me--"

"Relax, comrade! I ventured here because you and your X-Force friends have need of my more... *specific* information," Shalatov explained, ushering Brian to stay seated. I doubt you or even the elusive *Piotr* Wisdom has stumbled upon the locations of the Byron Agency's main European intelligence routing complexes."

Brian was almost floored with surprise by Shalatov's last words. The Russian leaned back in his seat, an obvious look of accomplishment on his face. Not only did this man know of his connection with X-Force, but he also somehow had the vital information that Brian had indeed been searching for. He couldn't be sure if Shalatov was completely reliable, however. His trust had easily been misplaced before, so Brian decided not to rely completely on the word of a drunk. At the same time, however, he couldn't just pass up a chance like this. There was no telling how long it would take to get the information himself, if at all.

"How could you possibly know those locations without being a Byron yourself?"

"Let me just say that I have my feelers extended much like yourself," Shalatov tossed back another drink and again filled it to the brim. "Not only do I know where the complexes are, but I can even tell you how to gain access to what you'll need from them. Surely you are interested in that."

"You would just willingly give up that information?" Alarms went off in Brian's head. He was suspicious before but now he knew something was definitely wrong with this situation. This was the kind of information people would die to keep secret and this man was ready to just spill all he knew. It didn't add up.

"I have my reasons. My own encounters with the Byrons have left a bad taste in my mouth... much like your country's vodka." Despite his objection to the alcohol, Shalatov downed another

drink. "Now, Mr. Braddock... Wouldn't you like to know how to cripple the Byron Agency?"

---

"What's an intelligence routing complex?" Terry Rourke asked. She stared curiously at the image of Brian Braddock on the monitor in front of her, every so often moving wisps of stray red hair from her face. Her unruly hair was always a source of compliments for her, but sometimes she wished she had the courage to just shave it all off.

One of the people who complimented her most was Peter Wisdom, who just so happened to be leaning over her shoulder at the moment. The monitor that Brian's face currently graced was part of the communications array aboard the Midnight Runner, the ship Brian Braddock had loaned to X-Force. The rest of the team was standing behind Terry, listening in to the conversation. The ship's auto-pilot ensured they wouldn't crash head-on into a mountain, even though it was mostly ocean beneath them. After taking off from Muir Island to head to a safe house, X-Force had been going in circles in deciding their next move.

"A way for you to put a serious dent into the Byron Agency," Brian stated over the electronic connection. "After speaking with a... interesting associate, I've found a way for you to gain access to the complexes."

"Great," Terry responded. "But what the hell are they?"

"*Ahem,*" Wisdom said, clearing his throat to speak. "Corporations, militaries, governments, banks... the whole lot of them use intelligence networks to collect and distribute data back and forth. It's how they get information to wherever it needs to be so everything operates nicely. Security agencies, like the Byrons' public face, use them, too. It's like how a computer has a mainframe that stores all of the operational information."

"How many of these things are there?" Terry asked.

"Well..." Wisdom began, "Black Air had a bunch of them spread all over the place. It stands to reason that the Byron Agency would, too. Maybe fifty?"

"Something like that," Brian cut in. "I have a list of their locations that was gracefully provided by our new associate." He relayed the encounter from earlier with Shalatov to the team, leaving out the part where the Russian had gone through a whole bottle of vodka by himself.

"If we can get into one of them intelligence routers," Marcus Raven said, moving forward from the back of the bay, "we can use that information to expose every dirty little finger the Byrons have stuck into SHIELD. Once the world knows about what those bastards have been up to, we might even be able to clear our names."

Marcus removed his wide-brimmed hat and ran his aged fingers through his hair. He didn't have to use his telepathy to know what his teammates were thinking. To put it bluntly, it royally sucked to be thought of as a worldwide terrorist. Their list of friends was short but their list of enemies was monumental. There wasn't a country on the planet that didn't want to get a hold of X-Force right now. To be cleared would be freedom.

"Send the coordinates, Brian," Wisdom said. He felt partially responsible for getting his friends into their current situation and he was willing to do just about anything to rectify that, especially after the recent death of Sarah Bane. The wound from that travesty hadn't yet healed.

"It sounds like a trap," said an acutely feminine voice said from the back of the plane.

Everyone turned to look at Lydia del Ruiz, the voice's owner. Lydia had been one of Interpol's top agents before transferring to SHIELD. She had seen more than her fair share of field assignments, some of which had included being misled into a trap. Sometimes, those she worked with called her objections paranoid. She preferred to think of it as being cautious.

"I agree," chimed in the seasoned veteran called Maverick, his arms crossed in front of his chest. "We have virtually no idea who this Shalatov guy is. He could be sending us to our graves without a second thought. Hell, he could even be on the Byron payroll."

"Shalatov linked me to X-Force through the investigating I've been doing on your behalf," Brian explained. "He dropped a few names on me. Names he wouldn't have known to bring up if he hadn't been spying on me. Apparently, Shalatov believes X-Force is nothing but a pack of rogue terrorists like everyone else. He owns a security agency much like what the Byrons claim to be. In the last year alone, the Byron Agency has taken almost fifty percent of his clientele. I did some checking of my own and found out that Shalatov's organization used to be quite reputable, but is now in danger of bellying up from the loss of business. Like it or not, Shalatov gave us the information hoping you dirty terrorists would take down the Byrons for him."

"So he is playing us?" asked Lydia.

"Yep," Brian answered. "Just not how you might think. He's not trying to kill you, he's just trying to use you."

"I've been used more times than I care to admit," stated Maverick. "This opportunity won't be coming around a second time, though. I say we go for it."

"I dunno..." Terry mumbled, her accent barely poking through. "What if we get in too deep with this? A straight up confrontation is one thing but taking our queues from someone just as twisted as Meyer..."

"We're doing this," Wisdom said. "Send the coordinates, Brian."

"Petey," Terry said, turning in her chair to face him, "we need to all be on board for this."

"We're going to head for the closest router and blow the holy shit out of it. Shalatov won't be using us; we'll be using him. It might be a trap but we're going to go ahead and spring it because this may be the only chance we have. It's not like we have a lot of leads here while we are on the run. We're going to end this thing once and for all. If you don't like it, we'll drop you off along the way. But we *are* doing this and we're doing it now."

"Easy, Peter," Maverick said, stepping forward. "This 'my way or the highway' garbage isn't going to fly. We're all feeling Sarah's death here, but rushing into--"

**[[ ALERT! ALERT! ]]**

The ship's automated alarms blared over Maverick's voice, cutting off the rest of his sentence. X-Force all collectively turned to the monitor display above the one Brian's head was shown on to see what the problem was.

Before anyone could read a single word on the display, however, an explosion rocked the Midnight Runner, tossing the people within around like rag dolls.

---

The fire burned gloriously. General Meyer looked on as the pyre that had once been a safe house for X-Force roared with a devastating life. The location had been easy enough to find in the stealth boat's computer despite having been mostly destroyed on Muir Island. This was a good start for his task of redemption.

Meyer was also pleased to see the entire area was covered with

Byron Agency soldiers. Just before his helicopter had touched down he had looked out the window at the blazing inferno to see hundreds of black-armored men surrounding the fire. It was good to see how his organization could blanket an entire city block.

After organizing this strike, Meyer had been informed that the Hierarchy was already pleased with his progress... and displeased with Sean Cassidy. Not only did the Hierarchy hold Cassidy just as responsible for the Muir Island debacle, but there was talk of removing him entirely from his Head of Special Operations position. Cassidy was already on his way to the United States to organize business there after which he would undergo review.

"Sir, we've intercepted X-Force's jet and opened fire," reported the highest ranking soldier in Meyer's immediate area. "We caught up with them on the other side of the island, about three miles from here. It's a hit and they're going down fast."

"Good," Meyer replied. "Swarm the wreckage. Take no prisoners."

Tracking information also retrieved from X-Force's boat had made it easier to locate the fools' next destination. Their safe house was now anything but safe. Now the mutant team would be defeated once and for all.

As General Meyer went back to watching the building quickly transform into smoldering ash, he knew there would be no escape for Pete Wisdom and his band of mutant spies this time. He was sure of it.

---

Byron soldiers surrounded the fallen Midnight Runner and had begun to converge on the air craft. Surprisingly, the ship had remained mostly intact, although one of the rear rudders had been completely ripped off. Smoke billowed out from the broken windows of the plane, a sure sign that the interior hadn't fared as well as the exterior.

"Move in!" one of the soldiers ordered the rest, which consisted of several dozen. "The General says he wants no survivors!"

Moving forward cautiously, the large contingent of troops had their various weapons all pointed at the main entrance to the Midnight Runner, which was barely being held on by a single hinge.

"Be careful, men! These terrorists are--HYUK!"

The soldier's head jugged back and he fell limply to the ground, completely motionless. Three other agents moved in while the rest paused, scanning the immediate area.

"He's been shot!" hollered one of the soldiers upon inspection of his fallen associate. A single bullet was lodged in his neck, one of the few parts of the soldier's body that wasn't protected by armor. "There's a sniper around here some--HYUK!"

Much like the first, the other soldier fell to the ground, dead.

"Sniper fire coming from the east ridge!" another soldier proclaimed. "Open fire! Open fire!"

Before any of them were able to shift their footing and aim the weapons at the new target, two other men were thrown to the ground from sniper shots. This time, however, the shots had come from the west.

"They're trying to box us in!" a third soldier yelled. "Get to cover! Fall in to the aircraft!"

Several soldiers closest to the east and west ridges went down on one knee to pepper the hillsides with gunfire, providing cover for the rest. The snipers made short work of them, however. Out of the several dozen troops only twenty-four made it to the wreckage.

"Someone radio Meyer and tell him...hey...what's all this stuff under the hull?" Curiosity getting the best of him, the soldier reached out to touch the grey substance lining almost the entire underbelly of the ship. It was soft and slightly malleable, like clay. A split-second later, the soldier made the connection, but it was too late.

KRA-KOOOOOM!

The tiny chirp of the detonator in Maverick's hand was nothing compared to the engulfing explosion of the plastic explosives that he and Lydia had attached to the Midnight Runner. He stood up from his prone position, a sniper rifle now resting on his hip. Pocketing the detonator, Maverick reached for his comlink.

"Beauty of a fireball, wouldn't you say, Marcus?" he asked. He could slightly feel the flames even from his spot on the ridge.

{{ Brian wouldn't think so, }} Marcus Raven replied. He stood up from his own prone position at the top of the west hillside. {{He's gonna be plenty pissed we slagged his ship.}}

"It was toast anyway," Maverick said coyly at his intentional

pun. "Least the crossfire bit worked. They scurried right where we wanted them."

{{ Telepathic scans of the area indicate no one survived. Time to move on. }}

"Right," Maverick agreed. "See you at the rendezvous. I'll let Petey know we're good to go."

---

"Good work," Wisdom said, nearly out of breath. He, Siryn, and Lydia had been running for what seemed like forever. Even though he was in pique physical condition, Wisdom felt short of breath, most likely from his chain-smoking habit. Lydia was bounding along fine with the sun out to fuel her strength, and Siryn had taken to the air.

Doral's Point, the small island where their safe house had once stood, was mostly covered with thick forests. The trees made it harder to transport all the equipment they had tried to save from the doomed Midnight Runner, but the three of them made their way as quick as they possible.

{{ We'll cover our tracks and meet with you at stealth boat, }}  
Maverick squawked through the comlink.

"Roger," Wisdom replied between huffs. "Let's hope this one didn't get blown up like the first. We'll never get Forge to build us another one. Over and out."

Though the terrain was against them, the three members of X-Force successfully made it through the dense foliage to their destination. It was rough because of the luggage they had been forced to quickly pack on, but they made it in good time nonetheless. The cave entrance came into Wisdom's view, which was a welcome sight compared to the thick forest.

Originally, the cave had only gone into the rock face a few dozen meters. After the safe house had been built, it was deepened to extend down to the shore, where hidden docks and their stealth boat were resting, waiting to take them all to safety.

There was a small clearing in between where the cave opened up and the forest ended. It was there that the three rogue operatives breached the edge of the tree line and collected together.

Wisdom smiled and reached for a cigarette resting behind his ear. Once Maverick and Marcus caught up with them it would be smooth stealth sailing from there on out. Wisdom pulled out his

silver lighter and flicked it open.

### **BA-DOOM!**

The blast from the explosion wasn't enough to knock Peter over, but it did succeed in blowing out the spark in his lighter, which was probably more irritating. The cave entrance closed up from the resulting rockslide, sealing off the entrance.

"Bloody 'ell!" he screamed.

Siryng instinctively took to the air again, leaving the equipment near Lydia. She shot straight up into the sky, leveling with the top of the hill the cave was inside of.

"Shit," she said, swooping back down to her teammates.

"There's smoke coming out o' the bottom of the cave, too, and there's a Byron boat sitting not far out from the shore. We're done in, guys. They just cut off our escape route."

"Now what?" Lydia blurted out. Her voice wavered slightly and with good reason. X-Force was trapped. "We're sitting ducks up here! It won't take long for more soldier to sweep this area and when they do--"

"When they do we'll be long gone," Wisdom chimed in.

"You're cute, Petey, but cut the bullshit. We need to regroup and dig ourselves in somewhere. With some luck we can fend off those assholes until we figure out a better plan."

"We already have a better plan, luv."

Wisdom reached into his utility vest and pulled out his cell phone, holding it up for Lydia and Terry to see. He flipped it open and pressed the speed dial, connecting to the one person on the planet that could save them. It was dangerous as the Byron Agency was undoubtedly monitoring any transmissions in the area, but he had no choice. X-Force would be apprehended and most likely killed unless Wisdom placed the phone call.

---

His sniper rifle now on auto-fire, Marcus Raven dropped to one knee to steady his aim and shoot down the several Byron soldiers that were giving chase. He and Maverick had been caught with their proverbial pants down while cleaning up their own trails and it was beginning to get ugly for them. The soldiers had surrounded them, trying to converge on their locations, but Marcus had picked up a few stray thoughts and alerted Maverick.

Maverick was gunning down as many soldiers as he could while trying to cover Marcus' back, but he was beginning to run out of ammunition. The pair wasn't quite in dire need of help yet, but they were damn close.

"I'm almost out, Mav," Raven yelled over his shoulder. "I hope you can swim, 'cause we're about to get sent up the river."

"I'm just about out, too," he replied. "And guess what? I don't have a ton of kinetic energy built up, either. These goons aren't packing energy-based weapons."

"I can't barge into their brains," Raven countered. "Their helmets are blocking my telepathy somehow. Ain't nothing they got that can block my other talents, though." Raven dropped his depleted rifle and stretched out his hands, tossing a wall of telekinetic force into the closest set of troops. "Not a permanent solution, Mav. We're in deep shit here."

"I've got one grenade left!" Maverick shouted as he rolled back closer to Marcus. "Here! Blow the hell out of them bastards while I cover you with the little ammo I have left!"

Marcus gladly took the round explosive from his teammate and stood up on both feet, ready to toss his last tactical offense. His hand reached up to pull the pin while Maverick expended the last of his ammunition.

Raven's finger curled around the pin, ready to yank it out and say his prayers. Before he got the chance, however, a blinding flash of light enveloped them. In a split-second, the light was gone and so was the nearly helpless pair of renegade SHIELD agents.

---

Tremont Alley had been home only to vagrants and squatters over the last few years. It was part of the seedy underbelly of London, rarely visited by the sophisticated and well-off, let alone the tourists. No one would have believed the drunks and derelicts when they tried to tell of the bright light that deposited five rugged individuals into the center of the alley.

"What the hell was that?" Maverick exclaimed, his guard still up. The suddenness of the transportation had done a number not only on his demeanor but on his stomach as well.

"Jesus!" Marcus yelled from behind Maverick. "Good thing I hadn't pulled this pin out yet! Where the hell are we?" he wondered aloud, then turned to X-Force's leader. "Wisdom? Why aren't we in the middle o' a firefight no more?"

"I reached out and touched the only friend we've still got," Peter said between puffs of smoke. He, along with Siryn and Lydia, had apparently gotten there before Maverick and Marcus. Wisdom was just starting his second cigarette, Siryn was looking over their salvaged equipment, and Lydia was having an animated conversation on her cell phone a ways down the alley.

"What do you mean? You called in a transport? Who?" Maverick had an idea of what Wisdom was talking about, but if it was what he suspected then he he was damn sure it hadn't been the best decision.

"Called up Fury," Wisdom responded, exhaling another breath of wispy smoke. "Had him use HERMES to get us the fuck out of there. Bit nasty on the reentry, though. My lunch feels like it's about to evacuate. Lydia is on her mobile with Brian to try and get us a ride. Fingers crossed for a chic limo service."

"Lose the jokes," Maverick commanded. "The Byrons were probably monitoring your call to Nick Fury, and that means they now have proof that he's been helping us. Good going, Pete. You just compromised Fury's whole operation!"

"Hey!" Wisdom shot back. "I did the only thing that saved our soddin' rears and that includes your own! I don't want to put Nick in any more danger than he's in but if I hadn't made that call we would either be captured by now or worse!"

"If you're both done pissing up each other's rope now," Lydia broke in, "Brian's sending us a couple of cabs. They'll be here soon, so I suggest we grab the equipment and move on out of the open."

Wisdom held his shared stare with Maverick for another heartbeat before finally breaking it off to pick up the nearest case of equipment. Siryn watched both men as the tension seemed to slowly die down. Maverick swore under his breath and finally turned to make sure Marcus had made it out with him alright.

Picking themselves up, X-Force headed down to the mouth of the alley to await their rides. An uneasy silence blared between all of them until the cabs finally pulled up to the curb. Stowing the equipment in the trucks of the vehicles, the team climbed in and the cabs drove off to somewhere in London.

---

The current director of SHIELD sat uneasily in his chair. The hard wood and uncomfortable configuration of the chair was causing Nick Fury's lower back to spike with pain. He thought

for a second that an organization like SHIELD would be able to afford something a little nicer, but then he realized that whoever sat in this chair wasn't supposed to feel comfortable. They were supposed to feel like they were in front of a firing squad. Right now, Nick Fury certainly felt like he was facing a battalion of loaded rifles.

"This meeting is now in order," stated one of the people sitting before Nick. There were ten in all, dressed in finely tailored suits and dresses – all of them several high-ranking UN officials, SHIELD officers, and the organization's financiers. Nick naturally didn't take well to their kind of bureaucratic authority, but there were two people sitting there that he almost hated with an immense passion. They were members of the Byron Agency who had a right to be present on account of the agency becoming the main financial supporters of SHIELD's operations. It sickened Nick to admit that the Byrons had a majority control on the worldwide police taskforce.

"Director Fury," the same man who had called order began, "we've recently completed our review of the Strategic Hazard Intervention, Espionage and Logistics Directorate, along with the revisions to its operations charter."

"*Ahem,*" one of the Byron representatives said, clearing his throat. "Charters. Plural."

"Yes, charters," the man agreed, appearing slightly annoyed. "We've revised the original charter and added a second, Director Fury. You'll be glad to know that according to our revision of the first charter, SHIELD will retain all of its departments and current operations in the field with you remaining in command as director of said operations. Unsanctioned alliances, however, are forthwith severed officially. This includes any and all mutant funded task forces, of which the rogue X-Force is a part."

Fury simply nodded in agreement, as he had expected as much. X-Force was currently known the world over as a terrorist cell wanted for multiple crimes. It would be unrealistic for him to hope SHIELD would be able to help them clear their names, especially with two Byrons on the board.

"And the second charter?" Nick asked begrudgingly.

"We've come across evidence that suggests you were personally involved with X-Force's escape from apprehension in an incident yesterday evening, Director Fury," spoke an unseen voice.

Fury swiveled in his torture chair to see General Meyer walk into the room. The man had a smirk on his face as he peered at

Nick, almost glad to see his face as he said that in a sickening sort of way.

"Moments before X-Force successfully hacked into HERMES and used it to escape my contingent," Meyer said, "records indicated that you received an untraceable phone call."

"I get untraceable calls all the time," Fury defended. "This is a spy outfit, after all."

"Then you won't mind verifying that you had nothing to do with X-Force's escape?" Meyer asked. The smirk on his face turned into a full grin.

"That call was both confidential and classified," Fury stated, his anger beginning to poke through as he turned back to face the board. "Who the hell is he and what kind of bullshit accusations are these?"

"General Meyer is leading the search for X-Force on behalf of the Byron Agency, Director Fury," the board representative answered. "His intrusion on these proceedings, while uncouth, is warranted. We are placing you personally as responsible for the capture of X-Force, Director. Unless you track down and bring them to justice, this board will be forced to invoke the second charter, which removes you as director of SHIELD operations, confines you indefinitely for terrorism pending a thorough investigation, and overhauls the SHIELD program with General Meyer as your replacement."

"So either I bring them in or you throw me in jail?" Fury sneered.

"This board can no longer substantiate SHIELD projects if one of them is responsible for terrorist activities," the man stated plainly. "You have your orders, Director."

"This is Grade-A horseshit!" Fury hollered, standing up from his chair. "This is practically the goddamn definition of blackmail! I thought the air conditioning was on the fritz when I walked in, but now I can see it's because of your stuffed shirts."

"Order!" the board representative said, slamming his gavel down. "Director Fury, you are out of line!"

"You're the ones who are out of line!" he shot back. "SHIELD wasn't started so corrupt security agencies could come in and use it to clean their dirty laundry. You're all keeping SHIELD from doing what it was meant to do with your back-alley corporate deals, ya bunch of bureaucratic jackasses!"

Ignoring the protest of the board and the chuckles of General

Meyer, Nick Fury kicked his chair out of the way and stormed from the room. If ever there was a time when he was caught between a rock and a hard place, this was it. Nick made his way back to the SHIELD Helicarrier and into his office, slamming the door shut behind him. He had a lot to think about. Somehow he had to help X-Force and keep himself out of jail at the same time.

The Byron Agency, while being comprised of the biggest piles of garbage Nick had ever met, had played the game well. SHIELD, X-Force, and even Nick himself were now all in check, and if Nick didn't play his cards right then there was going to be a lot to answer for.

---

**TO BE CONTINUED**

---



**#10**  
**Volume Two**



**Pete  
Wisdom**



**Lydia  
Del Ruiz**



**Theresa  
Rourke**



**David  
North**

"Rain, rain, go the fuck away..."

Aaron T. Jensen mumbled the lullaby softly to himself as he crept down the hallway and into the building's lobby. As a child, he had always sat in the big front window of his mother's house to watch the rain slide down the street, fascinated by the duality of nature. It could be both quiet and innocent, or powerful and devastating.

His job seemed like that at time, too. He was now in London, a lowly maintenance and repair technician after his failure to crack the Xavier Protocols at the Byron Agency's Nebraska cell. One day he was quietly and innocently working at the computer and the next day proved to be powerful and devastating. Just like nature. \*

\* [See X-Men #21 for details]

He sighed, but accepted his administrative leave for what it was: an easy way for the Byron Agency to strip him of his special operations position while he recovered from the attack all those months ago. He didn't like it, but what could he do? His job now was like the paper pushing of computer science and he hated it. The worst part that he could no longer bitch about various things with his friend and partner, Dr. Cam Sewkid.

"Are those damn TPS reports in yet?" Aaron demanded of the secretary in the lobby. He leaned over the front of her desk arrogantly, trying to give her his most intimidating gaze. It wasn't easy, since Aaron was roughly a hundred-pound stick.

"No, Mr. Jensen," she answered, rolling her eyes in the process.

"Well, get them here faster!" he yelled back. "And don't roll your eyes at me, sweetheart. I'll have you bent over this desk before I take lip from you."

"So never then?" she countered.

Aaron was about to give the insolent woman another tongue lashing, but in his frantic attempt at straightening his posture from the insult he managed to spill his coffee all over the front of his shirt. Colorful four letter words dribbled out of his mouth as he tried to wipe the mess off, even though it had instantly stained his clothes. The receptionist jumped up, a small smile hidden on her face, and offered a handful of tissues to Jensen. He smacked her hand away and turned toward the elevator on the far side of the lobby, continuing his verbal exercises loud enough to annoy everyone else in the large room.

Halfway there, Aaron snapped his head back suddenly, catching his breathe. He fell to the floor, smacking his knees off of the



**Marcus  
Raven**

cold marble, shaking violently. Foam bubbled out from between his lips as the convulsions grew steadily worse.

"Oh my Lord," a stray man hollered from across the lobby. "He's having a seizure! Quick, call an ambulance!"

Several others rushed to Aaron's side, futilely trying to aid him during the spasms. A few offered spouted off orders to hold his head steady, to check that he wasn't biting his tongue off, or asking if it might be a brain aneurysm. There was only one person in the lobby that knew what was actually wrong with Aaron, and he was barely paying attention to the scene from his spot across the room.

Near the doors, a man stood by himself beside a pay phone, a pair of sunglasses and a fedora hiding most of his face. Stealing a glance at the commotion, the man smiled slightly before turning back to the phone in his hand.

"The package has been delivered," Marcus Raven, resident telepath of the rogue X-Force, said into the receiver. "You and Lydia are up next, Pete."

---

## **MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

### **DISPOSABLE HEROES Part II: Setting Up The Pins**

*Written by David Golightly (script)  
and Cory Wiegel (plot)*

---

"Everyone just please stand back," the male EMT said. He and his female partner had moved in swiftly once the ambulance came to a halt outside the front entrance of the building. "Ma'am? Excuse me, ma'am? We were called in about a seizure victim?"

The receptionist looked up, just now noticing the emergency medical technicians that had busted into the building and forced their crash cart into the lobby. She jumped up from her chair and put on her best professional face. "Sorry...yes, Mr. Jensen was taken by our part-time medical staff up to the fifth floor."

"You have a medical team on staff?" the female EMT asked curiously.

"Yes, but don't worry," she responded. "I've been given

clearance to allow you up there. The lift is on your right just passed that pillar." She motioned to the elevators and nodded to a pair of security guards who immediately approached the EMT's. "These gentlemen will show you the way."

The female technician angled the gurney toward the elevator from behind while the security guards led them across the lobby. Most of the bystanders had moved out of their path at this point, with questions and assumptions still buzzing among them. The large stainless steel doors swept open and the four people piled into the spacious elevator, soft music playing overhead to welcome them.

"Oy," the male EMT nodded to one of the security guards. "You have a light?"

"This is a smoke-free building, sir," the bulky guard responded gruffly.

"Bloody hell...everywhere you go these days...ah, well."

With swift precision, the EMT's both dropped their equipment on the gurney and lunged for the guard closest to them. The male technician wrapped his arm around his guard, choking him. Two quick jabs to his kidneys forced the built up air out of his lungs, quickening the journey to unconsciousness. Simultaneously, the female EMT palmed the back of her guard's head, thrusting it forward into the steel wall of the elevator. With a loud crack and quick yelp of surprise, the guard fell to the floor in a lump, motionless.

"My eyes are up here, asshole," she mumbled to the knocked-out guard while pointing to her pupils. "There really are no gentlemen left in this world."

"Can you blame him, luv?" the male chimed in, a devilish smile resting on his face. "You're packing a nice set. I should know."

The woman grumbled something else vulgar before beginning the process of undressing. The man followed suit, quickly discarding his medical technician hat, shirt, and pants. Underneath their EMT uniforms were the tight-fitting, black fatigues they were more accustomed to as part of X-Force. Where two nondescript members of the medical profession once stood were now the wanted felons Peter Wisdom and Lydia Del Ruiz.

"I think you're losing your touch, Mr. Leader," Lydia snapped playfully. "First Maverick saves our bacon back on Doral's Point, now Raven's come up with an idea to infiltrate one of the Byron Agency's intelligence routing complexes."

"He ripped it off some HBO movie we were watching the other night," Wisdom replied, obviously irritated. "Just go let the others in while I track down the central mainframe."

The elevator came to a halt on the fifth floor and Wisdom leaned over to place a kiss on Lydia's cheek. He gave her a wink as he slipped through the doors and bolted down the hallway, while she sighed and smacked the button to send the elevator down to the parking garage.

"Men," she said, looking down at the guards. "You all think a peck on the cheek is all a girl needs to feel like a princess."

---

The ambulance that dropped off Wisdom and Lydia backed up to the loading dock in the Byron Agency's parking garage. The driver gently eased off the brakes so that the bumper was just far enough away from the dock to let the rear doors open up. The wide mirrors on both sides of the ambulance would have made the job easy if the driver's hair had stopped getting in her way.

"I swear I'm going to shave it all off some day," said Terry Rourke, also known as Siryn.

"Now, now," Maverick said from the back of the ambulance, "Don't deprive the rest of us just because you get a little pissed at your luscious locks, Red."

Siryn silently wished her teammate would drop dead. For the last couple of days Lydia had been spending most of her time with Peter, which made sense since they were engaged now. While she was gone, though, it meant she had to spend all her time around the testosterone-heavy males on the team. Traveling the world under the radar as a wanted terrorist had put a damper on her personal life. If she had to put up with Mav or Raven's comments any longer...

"Pop the doors," Raven ordered. "Lydia's on the dock."

Siryn slipped out of the driver's side door, leaving the medical technician cap on the seat. Maverick and Marcus Raven pushed the back doors to the ambulance open and spilled onto the dock where Lydia Del Ruiz was waiting patiently, holding the elevator for them.

"Pete make it to the mainframe?" she asked Lydia as she strapped on the equipment Raven handed her.

"No, but he'll be in soon," she replied. She was usually calm on their missions but Siryn noticed her posture was rigid and

precise, like she just wanted to get through everything. She didn't blame her. The faster they put the Byrons behind them, the better.

"Raven," Lydia said, "don't forget that you need--"

"Relax," the gray-haired man commented. "Ah'm the one who came up with this initially, remember? Ah'll be fine. Just take care of your part."

Lydia nodded solemnly, motioning for the rest of the team to join her in the elevator. "We'll let Marcus out on the fourteenth floor," she told the others once they had piled in beside her and the doors had closed. "He'll make his way to the security control center there and make sure the rest of us won't trip any alarms. Be careful, everyone. We've only got one shot at this."

"Piece o' cake," Maverick said, his expression unreadable behind his golden mask.

X-Force climbed the levels of the Byron Agency's building inside the elevator, preparing for what may turn into their final hoorah. None of them had noticed, however, the small and almost undetectable camera mounted in the far corner of the parking garage that had captured their entrance.

Whoever was on the other side of the lens had witnessed everything.

---

As he stalked through the corridors on the fifth floor of the routing complex and headed for the mainframe, Wisdom realized that it was strangely quiet. He hadn't encountered a single person in his search thus far, leaving him to think the floor was deserted. It was entirely possible since the level only housed machinery that required minimal maintenance, but still...

{{ Sparrow to Big Bird, }} squawked Peter's comlink. It was Lydia. {{ Raven is heading to the security center and we're almost in position on the upper floors; over. }}

"Roger," he whispered back.

{{ I'll cover your sweet ass from up here while the others coordinate with Raven. Once we get word, we'll move out to escape plan alpha. And you're supposed to say "over" when you're finished talking; over. }}

"Right, I'll be sure to remember that," he replied, rolling his eyes and reaching for a cigarette. "Over-dover."

{{ Don't roll your eyes, either; over. }}

Peter smiled, as only a few people on the planet could read him like Lydia. After all of this mess was cleaned up and they were able to sip martinis in front of any law enforcement agency on the planet, he would be sure to take her someplace nice. She deserved that.

"Just give me a call if anything changes, luv. Over."

Ending the coded transmission, Wisdom headed further down the hallway, keeping his guard up despite the lack of interference. The last thing he needed was to be caught with his pants down inside the Bryon's house.

The last door in the corridor crept into his field of view, ominously standing like a monolith. This was the last place to check out before giving up and moving to another floor. He needed to breathe in smoke and would kill for a match right about now.

"Bloody woman, stealing my lighter..."

**KRA-KOOOOW!**

The wall to his immediate left exploded out, tossing him against the opposite wall with a loud *thud!* knocking the wind out of him. Bits of concrete rained down all around him as he sat up, rubbing his head cautiously. The smoke from the explosion filled his nostrils, irritating the hairs in his nose. His vision was blurred slightly, the impact of hitting the wall jarring most of his senses. Staring at the fresh opening he could make out a lone figure, however.

"Piss off," Wisdom said in his best macho voice. "Who might you be then?"

"I'm the guy that's going to kick your nuts into your throat if you get back up," the tall, black man said as he stepped out of the hole. His skin was dark and his eyes were cold, a tattoo covering one partially. He leveled a handgun at Wisdom that he had never seen before, but it was fairly intimidating nonetheless.

Things had just gotten out of hand.

---

"Be ready for anything," Lydia told Maverick and Siryn. "When those doors open, head to your designated areas and watch each other's backs. Once

Wisdom gives the signal, we'll converge and get the hell out of here."

Maverick nodded in silent understanding while Siryn just readied herself. The trio had been through more missions than they could remember but this one felt different. There was a lot riding on the success of this operation; namely their freedom. If they could get in, do what they needed to do, and get out X-Force would have a huge weight taken off of their collective shoulders.

"Holy shi--" Lydia swore as the doors slid open.

"FREEZE!" the lead soldier ordered, leveling his weapon at the trio packed into the elevator. "DROP EVERYTHING YOU'RE CARRYING AND GET DOWN ON THE GROUND!"

The corridor before them was completely full of Byron soldiers, armed to the teeth with various weaponry. Even Maverick was impressed with the assortment of hardware pointed at his head.

Siryn tightened her grip on the equipment instead of following the soldier's order. Instinctually, she licked her lips and stiffened her vocal folds, immediately erupting with a sonic blast powerful enough to rip the rifle out of the leading soldier's hands. The scream rocked a few others back on their heels but one managed to squeeze off a shot into the elevator, throwing Maverick back against the wall.

Stealing a quick glance over her shoulder at Maverick, whose body armor seemed to have protected him just fine, she turned back to the soldiers at blasted them with another sonic cry. This time, however, her powers not enough pelted the attackers eardrums, but erected just outside of the elevator doors. The makeshift shield kept anymore bullets from finding their way into the elevator, but effectively boxed them in at the same time. X-Force was caught between a rock and a hard place.

"You all right?" Lydia asked Maverick, who was trying to sit up despite his bulky armor's best efforts to keep him down.

"Fine!" he yelled back. "Hurts like a bitch, though. Friggin' Byrons..."

"Siryn can't keep that up forever, Mav. I need you to make us a new door. Now."

Maverick used the back of the elevator to slide back up to his feet as he secured the equipment slung over his shoulders. Channeling all of his stored energy into his fists, the veteran soldier raised his hands toward the ceiling, a tiny smile on his face. "One fresh door, coming up."

The kinetic energy erupted from his fists, slamming into and through the elevator ceiling. Metal screeched as it was forced to bend back under the pressure of Maverick's assault, tiny flakes and shavings falling on top of the trio. Then, just as fast as it had started, Maverick turned off the juice and the newly made hole sizzled around the edges.

"Up, up, and awa--"

**SCREEEECH!**

The elevator began to plummet down the shaft, the brakes straining to stop its descent. Siryn finally ceased her sonic cry long enough to look through the hole Maverick had just created and was horrified at what she saw.

"You blasted the support cables!" she screamed. "Good going, Mav!"

Siryn steadied herself in the corner of the elevator, bracing her frail form as best as she could. Leaning forward so that she faced the floor, she again lit rip another powerful sonic blast that permeated the solid

bottom of the car. The waves and pulses of pure audio helped in slowing their descent, but even the standardized brake pads were having trouble halting their fall. Siryn redoubled her efforts, feeling like her throat would cave in from the exertion, but she couldn't give up. If she did, they would all be dead.

## **CRASH!**

The end result of their plummet was less impressive than the sound might have encouraged. The elevator car buckled slightly from the impact but the combined efforts of Siryn and the brakes had slowed them enough that no one was seriously hurt. In truth, they had only been jostled around. However, they were very far from where they needed to be now.

"Sparrow to Big Bird," Lydia said into her comlink. Static blared back her. "Shit...we've got problems. Siryn, are you okay to fly?"

"Yeah," she mumbled, even though her throat felt like she had swallowed razors.

"I need you to fly back up the shaft and find Peter. Find him and help him. Keep in radio contact every few minutes."

Siryn nodded and launched herself up through the hole in the ceiling, spreading her arms out to keep balance in the slender shaft. As soon as she was out of sight, Lydia turned to Maverick with a stern look in her eyes. She was undoubtedly pissed off.

"This whole mission is FUBAR," she told him. "If we can't get a hold of Peter that means you make the call. Do we abort? Should we pull out while we still can?"

"I don't think that's really an option at this point," he explained as he tested his personal handgun, making sure the fall hadn't damaged it. "We knew this might

be a suicide mission coming in, so there's no backing out now. We're all in this one hundred percent, no matter what." He slapped the chamber closed on his gun, holstering it to punctuate his statement.

Lydia Del Ruiz looked back up into the elevator shaft. Several emotions washed over her face in a matter of seconds, all of them passing just enough to worry her. "You're right," she finally said. "I just want to know who the hell set us up this time."

---

"Three...two...one...turn!" Marcus Raven commanded.

In response, two Byron Agency security guards turned their key cards simultaneously to unlock the door leading into the security control center. Raven, using his mental powers to usurp control over the guard's minds, immediately forced them into unconsciousness now that his goal was achieved. He even allowed himself a moment to smirk at their fallen bodies as he passed by them.

"This mission might go off without a hitch after all," he said.

Marcus turned in the open doorway and patted down the guards, taking their security passes and ammunition just in case they woke back up before he was done. It wouldn't be very comfortable for the entire Byron Agency to know what he was up to before he had completed his task in the security center.

"I was expecting you sooner," a female voice said from the inside of the room behind Marcus.

Marcus jumped back up to attention, swinging his carbine rifle off of his shoulder to point into the room. The voice had come from a large, black chair facing away from him. He reached out with his mental senses, trying to get a grasp on whoever was in the chair but wasn't able to "feel" anyone. It was like the person was a phantom, barely existing on this plain of reality.

He stepped into the room, making sure his eyes never moved from the chair. "How about you just spin that chair around nice and easy, so I'm not voiced to aerate that lovely leather chair."

"Always the smooth talker, right Marcus?" she said, spinning the

chair around slowly so that her body came into view. Marcus, upon seeing whom it was, relaxed and let the rifle dip down toward the floor. "But nonetheless, it's damn good to see you again."

"The feeling's mutual, Kitty," he replied.

Kitty Pryde, the mutant known as Shadowcat, stood up from the relaxing office chair. Plastered on her face was a cocky smile while the rest of her was decked out in the standard SHIELD attire, complete with sidearm. The pair eyed each other up and down, waiting for an explanation from the other.

---

Outside the building, more specifically on the streets surrounding it, several dozen British police officers combined with the Byron Agency's personal guard were busy blocking off intersections to keep traffic away. It would be impossible for an unauthorized person to get in or out of the vicinity, regardless of size or stature.

All-terrain vehicles, black vans, and even tanks had pulled up in front of the building, housing troops with familiar SHIELD crests on their uniforms beginning to pile out of them. Some were wearing full riot gear and charged with keeping the general crowd out of harm's way. Others were carrying more advanced artillery, waiting for the order to storm the complex. Each man and woman had their basic orders but no one would enter the building without a direct order from one of the men quickly approaching the location.

A black helicopter swept down from the night sky, birthed out from between a pair of dark clouds. Air rushed and swirled along the ground as the large transport slowly touched down in the center of the street, the propellers whipping around at deadly speeds. The aircraft was barely on the ground before the side hatch opened up and a man hopped down onto the worn asphalt.

Nick Fury, cigar freshly lit in his mouth, stepped forward. He ignored the chopper's blades, standing tall upon exiting the craft when so many ducked down as a reflex. The commanding officer ran up to Fury, preparing his initial report but immediately stopped as soon as he saw a second man step down from the helicopter.

The second man, General Meyer, walked up to and passed Fury, a smug look on his face. "Are we in lockdown, Commander?" he asked the stalwart man who had ran over to them.

"Yes, sir," he replied after glancing at Nick Fury. "Most of the

civilians and other personnel have been evacuated and X-Force is currently confined inside the complex, sir."

Meyer grinned like most men in his position would. He had been ordered to bring in X-Force dead or alive, and right now it looked like the morgue would be getting a call from him very soon. He had no doubt in the world that this was it for the rogue mutant team.

---

**TO BE CONTINUED**

---



**#11**  
**Vol. 2**



**Pete  
Wisdom**



**Lydia  
Del Ruiz**



**Theresa  
Rourke**



**David  
North**

"There are a few things you need to know," Shadowcat explained.

"Ah'm all ears," Marcus Raven replied in his usual southern drawl.

Marcus towered over Kitty Pryde as she typed away at a keyboard, drawing up various bits of information as she went. He hoped she would provide answers to his questions, answers that he and the rest of X-Force desperately needed. Things never seemed to go smoothly when you were wanted by every agency on the planet.

"First, your hokey plan to slip into the Byron Agency unnoticed was...noticed. The security team in the lobby recognized you when that Jensen guy went down. What made you think an organization as powerful as the Byrons wouldn't brief their own staff and provide them with photos of you?"

"Ah saw it in a movie last week," Marcus defended. "Needless to say the hero prevailed without all this hassle."

"Cute," she replied. "They contacted local law enforcement upon seeing your wrinkled mug, which in turn notified SHIELD and General Meyer. Meyer is all the rage these days it seems. He's wormed his way up to the top and actually has a chance of bumping Fury out. Meyer ordered all of the employees evacuated quietly, allowing X-Force into the building."

"But Meyer had the place on lockdown, eh?"

"Bingo," she said as she continued to furiously type on the keyboard. "Meyer planned on trapping you here but Fury flexed what little muscle he has left, garnering support with the U.N. and devising a joint operation led by Team X."

"C'mon, Fury isn't that close to the ax, is he?"

Shadowcat paused briefly in her typing, dropping her gaze from the screen as thoughts filled her mind. "Fury used to be one of the most stalwart men I had ever known. I would be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed in him for letting all of this happen."

"That's not exactly fair," Marcus defended. "The Byrons came at him from all sides, pushing their own agenda and undermining his authority. One man against a worldwide powerhouse isn't the definition of a fair fight. You can't put that kind of weight on him."



**Marcus  
Raven**

"As the head of SHIELD it was his responsibly to--"

"His responsibilities were limited to basic paper-pushing by the time the Byrons had their way!"

"Hey!" Kitty shouted back. "I have complete trust in Fury. He's the one that pieced together this plan to save your ass and gather what we needed to pull these assholes down. Do not judge me."

"Oh, but you can judge Nick?" he questioned, immediately regretting his words. "Ah'm sorry... Ah didn't - look, it just ain't easy hearing that one of the few men on the planet who has publicly defended us is washing up. Without Nick, SHIELD is as good as dead. If Meyer takes over--"

"I know. We won't let that happen. Look, we're playing the Byrons, big time. Team X and SHIELD have to work in conjunction with the Byron Agency for this operation so we have to be very careful, they cannot suspect what we're really doing here. While X-Force goes head to head with Team X as a distraction, I'll be extracting all the intell we need to expose those cockknockers."

"You've been hangin' around Bishop for too long," Marcus Raven commented. "Mighty big words for such a little gal. I suppose your inner computer geek is better than Wisdom or Lydia's tech skills. Better that you poke around inside they're machines undetected than Pete ransacking a bunch of files."

Kitty Pride smirked as she turned her attention back to the computer screen. Thoughts of Peter Wisdom drifted through her mind, but she quickly abolished them to focus on the task at hand. She needed to be precise and concise, something that Peter wasn't always flawless with.

Text scrolled rapidly across the screen, bits and pieces of code washing away amidst the graphics. Her hacking skills were a bit rusty but to her it was like riding a bicycle. To their credit, the Byrons had installed an impressive firewall, but Shadowcat had trained with SHIELD technology at least two generations ahead of what the Agency had.

"Bingo times two," she finally blurted out. "We're in."

"Now what? Do we print out a hard copy or something?"

"First things first," she replied, a devilish smile plastered on her face. "Wisdom's getting his butt kicked for excluding me from your rogue ops mission..."

---

## **DISPOSABLE HEROES**

### **Part III: Taking Care of Business**

*Written by David Golightly (script)  
and Cory Wiegel (plot)*

---

They say after being nearly knocked out from an extreme trauma that stars swim around your head, just like in the cartoons. Black dots circulate in your peripheral vision, threatening to fully cover your view. For Peter Wisdom, however, the trauma in question had invoked not stars but an entire galaxy.

"Jumpin' Jesus..." Wisdom mumbled from his position on the floor. After the wall had simply exploded beside him, Wisdom had been able to see passed some of the star-clusters in his vision to make out the image of a man he recognized. In better times he might have considered being happy at seeing the tall black man. Unfortunately, these were not better times.

"We've got the place surrounded," Bishop stated. "You and X-Force are coming with us, Wisdom. It's up to you just how much it hurts."

Whatever the Byrons had cooked up, Wisdom refused to take it lying down. Rolling forward as Bishop stepped closer, Wisdom lanced a set of hot knives into the air. The condensed energy blades sizzled as they punched into Bishop's chest. The lumbering future soldier, however, simply let his powers absorb the knives harmlessly and continued to march toward Wisdom.

"Has all that time evading the authorities made you senile?" Bishop asked as he closed the gap between them. "My powers let me absorb, store, or even re-emit various forms of energy. What else ya got?"

Desperate, Wisdom leapt at Bishop, his trained fist flying for the mutant's throat. Bishop was big but Wisdom was leaner and had speed on his side. With a little luck he could take Bishop down quickly and figure everything out later. The team was depending on him.

"Agile," Bishop commented as he caught Wisdom's fist in midair. "I see that Black Air training is still there."

Wisdom answered Bishop with his left elbow, pivoting and jamming it into the mutant's ribcage. Bishop spit out the air

from his lungs in surprise but recovered quickly, grasping Wisdom's free arm. The pair struggled, leaning back and forth, each of them clinging to their ground.

"He's a bit of agility for you," Wisdom said through his teeth. Shifting his momentum unexpectedly, Wisdom pulled back, breaking the struggle. Bishop teetered forward for a split-second, just the right amount of time for Wisdom to collect himself and send his boot flying into Bishop's groin.

CLANG!

"Bloody hell!" Wisdom exclaimed as he collapsed to one knee, gripping his toes.

"Never leave home without it," Bishop chided. "You sure fight dirty, huh?"

Bishop picked up the leader of X-Force by his collar and swung him around, tossing him into the far wall of the corridor. The impact resonated throughout Wisdom's body, causing a disc to slip from his spine. The nerve endings pinched together, sharp pain jabbing into his lower back. As Wisdom opened his eyes in an attempt to fight off the blackness yet again, Bishop raised his fists and unleashed a torrent of built up kinetic energy. The yellow wall of force slammed into Wisdom and pushed him through the weakened wall and into the next room, some sort of small receptionist office.

Bishop cracked his knuckles and stepped through the fresh hole, a spark of pride showing in his eye under the 'M' brand. "I said it was up to you how much this had to hurt. Give it up, Petey. Team X was ordered to bring in X-Force and we're not giving up until we do."

"Whose orders?" Wisdom yelled, spitting blood in the process. "I sure as hell know Fury isn't behind this. Meyer taking control yet or did you decide to just give in before the shit met with the fan?"

"Fury and Meyer are working together," Bishop answered, albeit hesitantly. "X-Force's exploits have been tolerated long enough. Quit your--AHH!"

Blinding light penetrated Bishop's pupils causing him to stagger back in both surprise and frustration. The stars now formed in front of the Team X member as he struggled to adjust to the situation. Rubbing the blackness away, he opened his eyes just in time to see Wisdom charging at him with a piece of rubble tightly grasped in his hand.

"I come prepared," Wisdom hollered, "with everything from cigarettes to flashbangs!"

Pieces of the rubble broke off in Wisdom's hand as he cracked it against Bishop's jaw, disorienting the mutant even further. Bishop fell back into the hallway, stunned but not out. Wisdom vaulted over his opponent and back down the hall, ducking under the stray blasts that Bishop was launching wildly.

His ribs were killing him, his back was on fire, and his vision was hazy at best. Peter Wisdom, the leader of a falsely accused group of mutant terrorists, was supremely pissed off.

---

"Wisdom!" Siryn called out. "Damn it, Wisdom, where are you?"

The Irish mutant paced down the corridor where Wisdom was supposed to be. After flying back up the elevator shaft that Maverick had inadvertently sent them down, Siryn had gone back to find Wisdom and warn him. Things were never as they seemed in their line of work.

"We're being sniped, Wisdom!" she continued to cry, even though she was beginning to fear the worst.

"You don't know the half of it sister."

Siryn spun toward the voice but was tackled around the waist before she could see who it was. Her attacker wrestled her to the ground, pinning her shoulders down.

"Doesn't all that hair get in your way?" the woman asked, revealed to be the mutant member of Team X called Shard.

"Better than a butch-cut like yours!" Siryn shot back.

Shard scrunched the dark skin of her face together in disapproval, obviously annoyed at the catty response. Pulling her fist back, she built up the bubbling energy inside of her for release, relishing the anticipation of shutting Siryn's mouth for good.

The mouth in question opened again, this time unleashing a powerful sonic assault that rocked Shard back and forth, forcing her to grip her ears from the pain. Siryn seized the opportunity and slid back, bending her legs to position them in front of Shard's chest. Exhaling, Siryn jettisoned the dark woman off of her.

"What the hell has crawled into your arse?" Siryn demanded

upon standing. "We used ta be friends! Remember joining X-Force and going on dangerous missions together? Now's no different! We've got a job ta do!"

"I've got my orders," Shard shot back. She regained her footing, too, although Siryn's attack had obviously upset her equilibrium. "Team X has been assigned to bring you down."

"You have ta let us do what needs done or the Byrons will never be stopped," Siryn pleaded, almost begging. After everything they had gone through the last thing she wanted to do was fight a former teammate. "Please."

"You know something?" Shard began. "I never really bought into all your mutant/human crap. Sure, it's a dream worth having. But I'm not my brother so you're preaching to deaf ears. Surrender and I promise not to bruise your face."

Siryn, virtually shocked at Shard's response, finally realized that things would never be like they had been. Old friends were new enemies and vice versa. The glory days of rampaging around the planet, righting wrongs and working toward a unified goal... The world had always been gray but now it was a deeper shade of it.

Siryn had always been a resilient woman, believing that each person had at least some good in them. Her first doubts in that philosophy had crept up when she discovered her father, Sean Cassidy, was not only aiding the Byron Agency but was also an important executive in their organization. She had witnessed firsthand the power of redemption...but for her father, excuses couldn't be made. Now, a former colleague threatened her freedom against what they both once stood for. Things had gotten out of hand.

Siryn gathered all of her fear and resentment, squashing them together to feed her strength. She took in a deep breath and Shard centered her stance in anticipation of another sonic attack. Raising her clenched fists, Shard struck preemptively, scorching the air between them with her plasma blasts. Focusing her vocal folds Siryn parted her lips and screamed, Shard's eardrums again vibrating at painful frequencies.

The maelstrom of pure sound ripped into Shard's energy attack, splintering the plasma bursts and defusing them in midair. Siryn was safe but Shard collapsed to the ground in a heap, her ears bleeding profusely. The Scottish mutant finally cut off her sonics when Shard sprawled on the floor, unconscious and defeated.

"Daft..." she mumbled between breathes. "Thas wha ya are..."

"Terry!"

Siryn's psyche sprung back into focus upon hearing her name. She looked up and passed Shard's body to the end of the hall where a welcome sight greeted her. He was bruised, battered, and limping...but Wisdom had never looked so good to her.

"Pete!" she called back.

Wisdom made his way to her, leaping over Shard. He grabbed her shoulder, quickly assessing her condition and realizing that the mission was practically over. If they bumped into anymore problems they might as well give up.

"Can you run?" he asked.

"I'm just a bit winded," she replied. "You look like hell."

"Thanks, luv. Nice to see I'm fairing better than Shard, though. We need to find the others and get out of this pit. We've been set up. Again."

"Almost a running gag with this lot, eh?"

"Almost," Wisdom said, turning to continue back down the hall. Siryn took one final look at her former friend and followed her leader.

---

"There isn't a four-letter word invented that begins to describe my ferocity," General Meyer whispered.

The monitor array before him was patched directly into the building's security feeds, giving him a bird's eye view of the entire complex. From their mobile headquarters inside an average looking big rig, the entire battlefield could be controlled. X-Force had proven to be more difficult in boxing in than he gave them credit for, however. He respected them as trained weapons but his respect ended there. The team had personally embarrassed him in front of his superiors and he would not allow that to go unpunished.

Marcus Raven had dropped off the grid, which wasn't a total surprise considering his background. But Wisdom had gotten the best of Bishop, Shadowcat had failed to report in, Siryn had taken down Shard, and now it appeared as if Lydia Del Ruiz and Maverick had barricaded themselves in a computer room.

"X-Force is an effective unit," Nick Fury, acting Director of SHIELD said, "but they'll be apprehended soon enough."

Meyer slammed his fist down on the console, causing a brief fit of static to splash across the monitors. "Don't act like you aren't pissing yourself from being overjoyed. You're loving this, aren't you?"

"Now why would you say that?" Fury asked as he took another puff from his signature cigar.

"You had a hand in training these people, Fury. They were some of your best SHIELD operatives before they became terrorists."

Fury simply smirked. He may be forced into working with Meyer but he didn't have to make his job any easier, especially when he was trying to take Fury's position within SHIELD. General Meyer may be a dangerous opponent but Fury was better at the spy game. Much better.

"Team X isn't doing jack-shit," Meyer finally blurted out. Reaching for the transceiver, Meyer pressed the button to switch communications on with his field agents. "Alpha Unit, move in on the subjects in sector A-19. Blast the damn wall out with shaped charges if you have to. I want these mutants captured."

"What are you doing?" Fury asked.

Meyer had slipped off his trenchcoat revealing the gleaming exoskeleton he wore underneath. The silver and green body suit was sporadically covered with wires and metal shards, the functions of which granted him an impressive personal force field. Fury met Meyer's gaze and wasn't sure if he was actually pleased or not at what he saw. He wanted General Meyer to go down in flames but desperate men do desperate things.

"Taking matters in my own hands," Meyer stated.

The General checked the settings on his exoskeleton before leaving the truck and motioning for a contingent of Byron soldiers to join him. Fury watched helplessly, unable to do anything else for X-Force than what his current plan already had done.

---

"Nothing short of a tank is going to get through that now," Maverick deadpanned.

He and Lydia had holed themselves up in one of the many computer workrooms inside the Byron Agency's intelligence routing complex. The information they needed was there, they just had to figure out how to extract it. Lydia hovered over one of the terminals, desperately trying to sift through the security

programs while Maverick finished pushing the rest of the furniture against the sole entrance.

"This seemed a lot easier when we were just talking about it," Lydia commented as she rubbed the bridge of her nose in frustration. "This software is a little out of my league. I can do it...there's just no telling how long it's going to take me."

"Take your time." Maverick checked his ammunition and cocked one of the obscenely large rifles he had vindicated from a guard. He knew patience was a virtue but his virtues were beginning to wear thin. They needed to either complete the mission soon or abort it altogether. "No one will be coming through that door."

In several flashes of light reminiscent of Star Trek, half a dozen SHIELD agents teleported into the center of the room.

"Oh, for crying out--!" Maverick complained before his own rifle erupted with gunfire. Two of the SHIELD agents buckled immediately after their kneecaps had been blown out by Maverick's assault, their own gunfire spraying wildly into the ceiling.

Lydia sprung into action, her superior strength overpowering the padding the agents wore as protection. Her hands were a blur of chops and jabs, disabling three agents before they knew what was happening. Maverick rushed the remaining targets, his own fierce attacks rivaling that of Lydia's. In less than the time it took to pour a glass of water the fight was over, the two members of X-Force barely breaking a sweat.

"Those cheaters," Maverick exclaimed, "using HERMES to 'port in. I swear, it's like the more work I put into something the less it takes to circumvent it."

"Take their weapons and tie them up...or something," Lydia said. "And quit whining, too. You're starting to sound like Peter when he doesn't get his way."

Maverick slung the rifle over his shoulder, attempting to retain his dignity. The SHIELD agents were unconscious and proved easy enough for the veteran workhorse to pile in the corner and out of the way. He had been through more wars in more countries than most people were even aware of. Acts of aggression and hostility came naturally when he needed to do what he did. Taking down a host of government agents that were just doing their job, however... SHIELD was still fighting the good fight, Fury was making sure of that.

KRA-KOOM!

Maverick instinctively rolled to one side, whipping the rifle around and falling into a prone position. The doorway he had so carefully barricaded had exploded into thousands of pieces, a result of the miniature battle-wagon now treading through the wall. Soldiers bearing the symbol of the Byron Agency piled in around the armored vehicle, weapons drawn. To make things worse General Meyer himself was leading their entrance.

"A tank," Maverick said, dumbfounded. "They have a fucking tank. Of course they do. Why wouldn't they have a goddamn tank?"

"Move!" Lydia ordered. The terminal she had been hovering over had cracked in half from the explosion, merely a shell now and totally useless. She dove behind a worktable that was bolted to the wall, swearing all the while.

Bullets peppered the opposing wall as the Byron soldiers mercilessly opened fire. Maverick hugged the floor, waiting for the customary cease-fire to occur. This display of fire power was just that, a display. Meyer probably wanted to bully them into giving themselves up. Before long he would offer them a chance to surrender.

"Hold your fire!" Meyer ordered, his men quickly complying. "Mr. North! Ms. Del Ruiz! My orders are to bring you in dead or alive. You've caused quite an uproar within the Hierarchy not to mention the SHIELD council. Hell, even the U.N. wants your heads on a platter and they're the most apathetic pack of fools I've ever seen."

Maverick aligned the sights of his rifle. It was a bit bulky for his tastes and probably less accurate than a standard garrand, but at such a close range he wouldn't complain. Meyer's ugly, wrinkled face came into the center of his vision, the perfect smug target.

"As you've probably guessed by now I'd rather bring you in on a slab. I could say it's nothing personal but we all know that's a load of hogwash. Maybe if you--AH DAMMIT!"

Maverick's bullet slapped against Meyer's force field, ricocheting harmlessly into the ceiling. His aim had been perfect but it had only succeeded in aggravating the General. Meyer, cursing profusely, yanked a rocket launcher off of a nearby soldier, aiming it haphazardly into the room.

Maverick jumped into a crouch and blasted the General with a wave of kinetic force, rocking him off-target even further. The force of the virtual punch caused Meyer to grip the launcher tight enough to pull the trigger.

FHHH-BOOOM!

Lydia gripped her head until the newly formed hole in the wall beside her finally stopped raining down plaster. Seeing her one chance to escape, she leaned hard into the table, snapping the bolts out of the wall. Her augmented strength hefted the worktable into the air and fired it off, crashing into the stunned pack of Byrons.

"Go, go, go!" Maverick yelled as he continued his energy assault.

The mutants vaulted through the hole and into the following hallway, Meyer and the accompanying Byrons unleashing their own destructive assault. Bullets and plasma blasts whisked by them, chipping away at the corridor. Meyer's exoskeleton provided him with offense as well as defense and he managed to catch Maverick's leg in the shuffle. Searing pain jabbed into the veteran's leg as Meyer's crimson energy stabbed into him.

"Bastard!" Maverick called out. He dove through the hole, spinning midair in true Hollywood fashion, his rifle discharging on full-auto. He landed in a pile, Lydia backing up beside him.

"We're being flanked, c'mon!" she screamed over the roar of gunfire spilling into the hall.

Maverick twisted to see what she meant, immediately feeling both relief and disappointment. At the end of the hall they had just barged into stood Peter Wisdom, wrestling with a SHIELD agent. Behind him Terry Rourke kicked a Byron soldier in the knee, following it up with a jab to his windpipe.

"Shit..." Maverick muttered. "Where's Raven?"

"Don't know," Lydia answered while she helped him to his feet. "We've got to--"

KRA-KOOM!

The tank plowed through the hole, widening it and nearly running over the pair. The mutants ran down the hallway as General Meyer stepped through, his dark red force field covering his broad smile.

---

"Are you receiving all of this?" Kitty asked anxiously.

{{ You bet we are, }} Brian Braddock replied, his voice sporadically seeping through the static of the speaker phone.

{{ Moira is setting up the patch to our contacts now to distribute the intell as soon as the upload is complete. }}

Marcus sighed in relief. He had been looking over Kitty's shoulder while she hacked through the Byron security net, not once relaxing. They were so close to exposing the Agency. Given X-Force's luck, however, he knew that counting his eggs before they hatched was a bad idea. Now that Kitty had begun the upload all of the information necessary to expose the Byron Agency's plot to take over SHIELD he finally allowed himself a moment of pride.

"As soon as this is done we're going to vamoose," Shadowcat said. She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, the tension finally beginning to break.

{{ We'll be forwarding these Byron Indentures to virtually everyone we know. Political affiliates, military police, Interpol...hell, even the U.N.'s medical staff. We owe you big for this one, Kate. }}

"Thanks, but we aren't out of the woods yet," she responded. "Just as soon...what was that? Marcus?"

"Ah heard it, too," the southern mutant said. "Sounded like someone said 'clear'?"

Beep Beep – SHOOM SHOOM SHOOM!

Miniature explosions erupted along the edges of the door, blasting it off its hinges. A thin layer of smoke billowed through the opening as four Byron soldiers leapt into the room, their green body armor reflecting the fluorescent ceiling fixtures.

Marcus instinctively raised a telekinetic shield in front of them just in time to repel the hot lead the soldiers had shot. "Keep the upload going!" he called over his shoulder before charging the four antagonists using his TK shield like a battering ram.

"Telepathic scramblers in those helmet, eh?" he commented. "Can't say Ah'm not disappointed. Have to do this the hard way now."

Marcus pushed his TK shield into the closest soldier, bowling over him and one other. He kicked the midsection of a third and grabbed his neck in a reverse headlock, smashing the crown on his head into the cold floor. The fourth soldier moved in to knock Marcus out with the butt of his rifle but found another TK shield in place around him, halting his progress.

"Yes!" Shadowcat yelled in triumph. "We got it Marcus! The

upload is--"

B-BLAM!

Kitty froze, the gunshot resonating in her ears. Directly in front of her and three inches from her nose, were five bullets hovering in the air and spinning counter-clockwise. She adjusted her focus to see Marcus reaching out toward her with his hand, sweat beginning to bead on his forehead. His other arm was extended back and pointed at the soldier who had fired the bullets, now trapped by Marcus Raven's telekinesis.

"Take...take him out, Kitty!" he muttered, the exhaustion almost overwhelming him.

Marcus suddenly spasmed violently as another plethora of bullets bore into his lower back. The gunman behind him fell to the floor, his TK shield now rendered inert. Shadowcat, horrified, phased into intangibility just in time as the bullets Marcus had been stopping regained their velocity. She watched in ghostly incapacitation as her teammate and friend fell forward, the gun in the hand of the soldier behind him still smoking. Blood began pooling under Marcus, a sure sign that Shadowcat's fears were coming true.

"Marcus!" she cried, tears beginning to swell in her eyes. She charged forward, all further opposition futilely passing through her. She phased pieces of her body in and out of corporal form, viciously kicking one soldier in the head and another in throat. The soldier who had shot Marcus wasted his ammunition until the gun clicked dry, which prompted Katherine Pride to pull out her own weapon.

There were no clever words to say, no one-liners appropriate for the death of her friend. She simply pulled the trigger and killed the man who had murdered Marcus right in front of her eyes. There was also no final feeling of retribution or completion; Marcus was dead.

She dropped her weapon and fell to the floor beside Marcus, cradling him in her arms. She gripped his aged hand and squeezed. It was already beginning to grow cold.

"I'm so sorry..." she told him. "But it worked. We did it. You and me. The Byron Agency has been exposed, Marcus..."

She gently rocked back and forth, holding close the man who had taught her so much. All the training in the world couldn't help with the initial shock of losing someone she respected so much. She clung to the small amount of levity that was provided by the act Marcus had died for. The enemies he had

fought so boldly against would finally burn down in the flames of their own making. The Indentures were out there...it was only a matter of time now.

Shadowcat's earpiece warbled with the sound of Nick Fury, screaming for an update of the current situation. He barraged her with questions and concerns, even warning her of imminent danger now that General Meyer had personally stormed the complex.

She let go of Marcus just long enough to remove the earpiece and drop it to the floor. She wrapped her hand back around the southerner's head, holding him as tight as she could and burying her face in his soft, white hair. Her tears mixed with his blood, leaving indents in the crimson pool under them both.

---

**TO BE CONCLUDED**

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**



**Lydia  
Del Ruiz**



**Theresa  
Rourke**



**David  
North**

"They have...a goddamn...tank!" Maverick muttered while throwing himself to the hallway floor.

Wisdom, Lydia, Siryn, and Maverick all dove for cover as another blast rocketed out of the tank, further decimating the infrastructure of the Byron Agency building X-Force had infiltrated. The team had once again been caught off-guard, completely blind-sided by the fact that the Byrons had wrestled enough control over SHIELD to use their resources against the mutants. Before he hit the floor, Maverick caught a glimpse of the exterior of the complex through a window, seeing dozens of SHIELD agents and Byron soldiers standing ready side by side.

General Meyer, perched atop the lumbering tank, was fuming. "Take them down!" he ordered. "Prisoners are not to be taken! I want these terrorists dead to rights!"

The General glowed a faint crimson color as his exoskeleton hummed with power. In his eyes the mutants were not only his assignment but his answer for redemption. The Hierarchy inside the Byron Agency had given him an ultimatum: stop X-Force or else. He had been humiliated at the hands of the rogue team, defaced in front of his own men, and run ragged by their antics. As far as he was concerned, today he would drive the final nail into their collective coffin.

Maverick hopped up into a kneeling position, ready for whatever came his way next. Surprisingly, he saw Wisdom and Siryn diving back into the main room where the tank was resting while Lydia Del Ruiz flanked it from behind, four Byron troops laying unconscious in her wake. He fired off a quick kinetic blast to distract Meyer while he scurried back into the room, picking up on his teammate's intentions.

"Bastards..." General Meyer called out from atop the tank, his force field flashing with power as the kinetic blast washed over him. "If you turn yourselves in I promise not to--what are you--AHH!"

Meyer grasped for his ears to buffer out the intense wailing of Siryn's vocal folds. Wave after wave of concentrated audio assaulted his inner ears while Wisdom slashed at the tank treads with his plasma knives, keeping it in one place for their combined attack. If his personal force field hadn't kept his palms from reaching his ears Meyer might have been able to avoid one of his eardrums almost rupturing.

"Maverick!" Lydia screamed over the roar of Siryn's voice.

The veteran mutant ran to her side, following her motions toward the back of the tank. Lydia pointed at a small section



**Marcus  
Raven**

housed just above the rear axle where a heavily armored chamber apparently rested. Before Maverick totally understand what she meant, Lydia exerted her solar-fueled strength and bashed the chamber wide open, the armor bending back like tin foil.

"Blow it!" she ordered before diving back out of the room.

Maverick tossed a look at Wisdom and saw that he had done the same, grabbing Siryn on his way out. Meyer turned around and eyed him up, the anger seething behind his pupils. At that exact moment Maverick understood their opponent: he would keep coming until he was either dead or the team was killed by his hands.

Maverick released the majority of his stored kinetic energy at the mad General, knocking him off balance. His reserves were low but he didn't expel all of his energy. He withheld the smallest amount...and then fired it directly into the fuel cauldron that Lydia had punched open.

KRA-KOOOM!

The back of the tank exploded upwards while the front was driven down, lodging the entire vehicle in between floors. Chunks of shrapnel made up of the tank's thick armor sliced through the rooms, punching holes through the walls and imbedding themselves into whatever surface got in their way. A giant ball of flame erupted from the back of the tank, completely engulfing the General and setting off the sprinkler system.

Maverick, blown back into the far wall by the explosion, tried to sit up but quickly decided against it once the sharp pain of a broken rib screamed its resistance at him. He hoped the others had gotten clear as he tried to find them through the haze of water falling over everything, but found himself distracted by the ringing in his ears.

"David?" he heard Siryn say from somewhere to his left.

The red-haired Irish woman rushed to his side to help him up. Even though he would never admit it out loud, he felt woozy and definitely needed the help.

"Everyone okay?" he asked.

"Peter's a little shaken," she replied. "He covered me with himself just before you--"

Screeching metal cut off Terry Rourke's words. The pair

whipped their heads around toward the source of the noise to see something that shocked them but at the same time did little to surprise them. General Meyer, his dark red force field still glowing strong, peeled himself out of the center of the tank with a look of absolute vengeance plastered on his face.

Halfway through the process of extracting himself Meyer grinned and flexed his arms, sending power into and out of his force field. The rest of the tank violently shook and shattered, shrapnel once again exploding throughout the rooms. A chunk of it caught Siryn in the forehead and she fell into Maverick's arms, nearly knocked out but still awake.

"I'll kill each and every one of you with my bare hands," Meyer said. "Starting with your arrogant leader."

Meyer launched him across the room, empowered by the exoskeleton. He landed twenty feet away from where he started, now face to face with the battered, bruised, and bloody Peter Wisdom.

---

## **DISPOSABLE HEROES**

### **Conclusion: The End of Times**

*Written by David Golightly (script)  
and Cory Wiegel (plot)*

---

Shadowcat wiped at her tears. She hadn't let out even the smallest of whimpers but there was nothing she could do to stop the tears falling from her big, round eyes.

{{ Shadowcat, report! }} Nick Fury ordered over her headset.

She gently closed the eyes of her deceased friend and former teammate, Marcus Raven, before letting him slip out of her arms and onto the cold floor. She found herself wishing that she had never even met the southern man...that way she wouldn't feel this stabbing pain in her heart.

"Shadowcat here," she finally responded. "All the information we need has been successfully uploaded. The Byron Indentures are out there, being routed to various agencies the world over. It's over."

{{ I got it, kid. I've been trying to contact you for a solid five minutes now. What the hell is going on in there? }}

"It's Raven, Colonel," she replied, sniffing slightly. "They got him while I was working on the upload. He...he's dead, Nick."

The usually loud and aggressive SHIELD Director held back his words. Kitty Pryde thought of all the times that she and the Colonel had lost important people to their operations, each seemingly more devastating than the last. As cold as it sounded, death came with the job and they both knew it. She wondered why things always had to get worse before they could get better.

{ { I'll send a recovery team in for him as soon as I can, } }  
Fury finally replied, his stern voice back in place. { { Right now I need you to focus. I need your help so drop down a couple floors and take out the security grid for us. Good work, Shadowcat. Fury over and out. } }

She heard the soft click in her ear as the communiqué ended, leaving her in silence. She knew Fury was right, that she had to focus on saving her comrades that were still alive. She took one last look at the gentleman Marcus Raven and then phased through the floor, dropping down to join the final battle.

One way or the other, Meyer was going down once and for all.

---

"I'm going to enjoy this," Meyer said over the crackle of his exoskeleton's energy. The General had Peter Wisdom raised over his head by the collar, the X-Force leader looking fairly worn around the edges and near the brink of exhaustion.

Just as Meyer cocked his fist back, the deadly crimson force field encircling his clenched fingers, another hand reached out and caught Meyer by the wrist. Meyer's eyes threatened to pop out of their sockets as he turned his attention to whoever dared grab him.

"No, actually," Lydia said, her own immense strength fighting Meyer's, "you're not."

Throwing a right cross that could shatter bones, Lydia connected with General Meyer's chin, sending him flying away from Wisdom. "But I'm sure going to enjoy this."

Lydia ran passed Wisdom, who was desperately trying to stand up on his own on shaky legs. He had never felt so tired in all his days as a trained operative. Being blown up, beaten, shot at, and chased has that effect on a person. Now, the woman he cared about most in the world was fighting for both their lives.

Straining against every nerve in his body, Wisdom pushed off

the wall and strode purposefully toward the sparring fighters. Concentrating on placing one foot in front of the other, Wisdom navigated his way around debris and shrapnel...before promptly passing out, smacking his head on a chunk of the wall.

"Peter!" Lydia yelled after chancing a glance over her shoulder.

Meyer, taking advantage of the distraction, pelted her across the face with a closed fist. Her teeth rattled and spit flew from her mouth as the pain enveloped her jaw. The General followed the attack up with a boot to her midsection, causing the female mutant to fall to her knees in a heap and short of breath.

"I'm nearly at my wits end because of you," Meyer stated. "Do you have any idea of the damage you've caused to this country, this organization, and to me? You can't even show your face in a post office and for what? To prove a point? Because you don't like us? Because you can't stand the thought of someone other than yourselves in control of the world's largest military network! You're arrogant, self-serving, repugnant muties!"

Meyer stomped across Lydia's face, the force field adding to the hit and forcing her to hug the floor. A tiny drop of blood oozed out from between her lips.

"The world will be better off when you're six feet under," Meyer added as he readied his fist for the killing blow.

Meyer's energy-laced knuckles flew, striking down on something round and hard that wasn't Lydia Del Ruiz's already bruised face. Maverick's chest swelled as he absorbed the kinetic energy of Meyer's assault, feeding his mutant abilities with his increased strength.

"Bad move, asshole," Maverick said. "Back off before I snap your scrawny little neck."

Meyer roared and continued to pound on Maverick with all of his enhanced strength. A right cross, a left jab, another right cross, an uppercut...Maverick took it all in stride as he allowed his mutant powers to absorb what they could. Even though the attack empowered his reserves, Maverick still felt shaken by the powerful impacts against his worn skin.

Slipping his right arm inside of Meyer's left, Maverick pivoted and shifted his weight around to put the General in a strangle hold. Meyer may have had the edge in brute strength thanks in part to his exoskeleton but Maverick had decent leverage on his side. So long as he could keep his arm locked and his weight against the General, he would be able to hold him.

"Get up, Lydia!" the veteran mutant yelled. "Get to the others! Grab Pete and Terry, find Marcus, and get out!"

Lydia, still seeing stars in front of her from Meyer's last kick, hesitated about leaving her friend behind. She wanted to help swat their tormentor down; the man who had one of their teammates killed and had caused so much trouble on an international level. As far as she was concerned death was an easy escape for what he deserved.

In the far reaches of her peripheral vision she saw something lying just above the rubble. It was Wisdom, looking like the Grim Reaper had slapped him across the face. At that moment everything in her mind concerning Meyer was flushed away and replaced with utter concern for her lover.

Springing up and forgetting the grudge match unfolding behind her, Lydia bolted for the other side of the expansive room to try and salvage her teammates.

"I beat you before," Maverick said matter-of-factly, "and I'll damn well do it again."

"I'm running on full intensity, you stupid little worm of a man!" Meyer shot back, his nostrils flaring and the crimson energy of his exoskeleton buckling around him. "Your powers can't hold out forever. Sooner or later I'll grind your bones in between my knuckles and then we'll see what happens to your precious friends."

Maverick head-butted the General, sending him spinning away in a slight but all too brief daze. Meyer quickly recovered and used the distance between them to fire off a concentrated amount of red electrical discharge at the absorbing mutant. He diverted power from the strength augmenters to his gauntlets, doubling the output of his steady blast.

"They'll hold out...long enough!" Maverick said over the bombardment. His muscles and bones felt like they were on fire from all the energy he was absorbing.

"Even if you manage to stop me you'll still have to deal with the half dozen platoons awaiting orders outside to open fire on your worthless hides! You're paddlin' upstream, boy. Give it up!"

Instead of answering the smug Byron leader with a verbal retaliation, Maverick planted his feet firmly on the ground and raised his left hand to press against Meyer's energy assault. His hand began to glow a bright yellow as his powers did their best to block the attack, while his other hand released a volley of kinetic energy back at the General. They were both now caught

in a loop, the same energy running back and forth between them in a wide arc. Maverick knew this wouldn't work forever since the electrical discharge couldn't be absorbed the same way the rest of Meyer's attacks had been.

For now, all he could do was buy his teammates a little more time to survive.

---

"Round 'em up!" Fury ordered his SHIELD agents.

The Byron soldiers stationed outside the complex all raised their hands and dropped their weapons. Fury ripped off his trenchcoat to reveal a blue, standard-issue SHIELD uniform underneath, complete with sidearm. Some of the Byrons looked like they wanted to object to being apprehended but one glance from Fury shut them all up.

"Keep 'em in check, Sergeant," he told one of the commanding officers on scene. "They aren't under arrest...yet. So far they've just been following the orders of complete morons."

"Sir, yes, sir!" the agent replied, a wry smile across his face.

Fury glanced up at the complex towering over them. Smoke billowed out of some of the windows and one entire section had been leveled from an interior explosion. Now that the Indentures were in the hands of the right people, Fury was ready to finally make his move. If Shadowcat could do her part and lower the security grid that was miraculously still in place then Fury could do whatever he could to help X-Force.

It was time pick up SHIELD by its collective bootstraps and come to the rescue.

---

Jumping over the debris and waving the smoke out of her path, Lydia bounced back into the large room where the tank had exploded. She frantically turned from left to right, trying to catch sight of Wisdom again. The remnants of the tank had kept trying to slide all the way down to the next floor, shaking the very foundation of the building. Every so often Lydia would be rocked back and forth as if the entire place was ready to come down on top of them. In her panicked jostling she had lost sight of her lover.

In between the smoke she saw something that stuck out like a sore thumb: bright, red hair. She raced over to Siryn, who saw her coming through barely opened eyes.

"Wake up!" she told the Irish mutant. "Come on, Terry, we

need to get out of here before the whole place falls over!”

Siryne rolled her neck around in Lydia’s cradling arm and coughed up a mouthful of blood. Lydia was shocked and terrified to see that one of their most powerful members had taken a hit directly to her throat. The pain must have been unbearable, especially for someone like Terry.

Lydia laid her teammate down as flat as she could to administer first aid even though she knew how futile it all was. She checked over Terry’s body, pulling in a breathe as she saw what looked like a concussion swelling on the top of her scalp. Siryne was already barely conscious and if she slipped away now she ran the risk of falling into a coma.

Things were way beyond her control and she knew it. Lydia’s heart began to race as she tried to figure out what to do next. She looked around to see if any of her surroundings would inspire some miracle action to occur.

“Carry her...down the fire stairwell,” Wisdom managed to mutter from over her shoulder.

Lydia whirled around to see Wisdom hunched over a few feet behind her, clutching at his side with a spot of blood dribbling out of his mouth.

“Peter!” she exclaimed, relieved. “I almost thought that...oh my God...”

“Dead?” he finished for her. “You can say it, but this ol’ bloke’s still got some more fight left in him.”

The leader of X-Force tried to lean on the crumbling wall to stand up straight when a stream of electricity arced into the side of his body, knocking him up and over the pair of women.

“But not enough!” General Meyer growled as he continued his vicious attack on the helpless mutant.

Their adversary was limping and obviously fatigued from his showdown with Maverick but a quick glance at the fallen veteran soldier told Lydia everything she needed to know. Their team was falling apart one person at a time.

Lydia, grabbing a stray piece of water piping from the floor, charged the General in an attempt to break the excruciating circuit he had formed with her fiancé. Wisdom’s cries of agony ceased as her tackle took Meyer out of position long enough to stop the crimson assault. Reasserting her grasp on the slender pipe, Lydia wailed General Meyer across his protected face with

all her might.

"That'll be enough from you, Miss Del Ruiz," Meyer stated as he blocked her second strike and reached for her throat. His speed surprised her as he easily clenched his fingers around her soft neck, squeezing the life from her. She fought back, flailing wildly against his force field, but a quick shock from his gauntlets sapped the brutality from her.

Placing greater and greater pressure on her windpipe, Meyer formed a vindictive smile and watched as he slowly murdered Lydia Del Ruiz.

"P...Peter!" she managed to gasp.

Smoke wafting from his person, Wisdom shot up just in time to see Meyer let Lydia limply fall to the floor. Her petite body slipped down to rest at his feet and the fire within Peter Wisdom's soul was ignited once more. The aches and pains that riddled his own body were forgotten and the force that flowed through him was more powerful than a straight shot of adrenaline. Every color in the war torn room faded away, as the only thing Wisdom saw was red.

He wanted to bellow at the top of his lungs and swear until his throat was raw, but he couldn't concentrate on anything other than killing. Forming two of his patented hot knives made up of solidified plasma into each hand Wisdom tuned out everything in the vicinity except for the tyrant turncoat that had chased them halfway across the world.

"I'm going to fucking rip your black heart out, you little sod of a man," he said, to which the General only shook his head challengingly.

Wisdom covered the distance between them in a plethora of great strides as he screamed a battle cry filled with malice and deadly intent. Meyer expected the former Black Air agent to launch a ranged attack, as he knew Peter was accustomed to doing with his plasma shards. Much to his chagrin, Wisdom pumped energy through his hot knives and elongated them into two fluid energy whips. The tactic had worked wonders against the world-class assassin Elektra and now Wisdom planned to slash away at Meyer with them.

Wisdom yanked up hard with his left hand and one of the whips sliced into Meyer's force field. The General stepped back to collect himself from the surprise maneuver but found another whip slashing at his other side. Again and again Wisdom hacked and slashed, forcing Meyer to keep losing ground. The pair leaned left and right as if they were participating in some kind

of psychotic dance, with Wisdom obviously leading the foray.

One final slash sent Meyer tripping back over a damaged office desk chair and sprawled out flat on his back. Wisdom let his whips dissipate as he stepped forward and towered over the fallen General. He thought simply pressing his assault and unleashing his fury would be enough to calm him down when it came to this, but he still wanted to spill his enemy's blood. Meyer, who's exoskeleton had been too damaged for him to even sit up, was forced to sit and await what was coming.

"You're what's wrong with this world," Wisdom spat out. "You say you're doing one thing but you're really doing the other. Bold, two-faced lies are the only way you operate so how could you expect to accomplish anything? You've made a total mockery of a once proud organization and because of that we are all involved in an international incident. And for what? So you can prove your dick is bigger than Fury's? Or some pompous paper-pusher in the U.N.?"

"You wouldn't understand..." Meyer said between breathes.

"The hell I wouldn't! People have died because of your pissing contest! Good people that you aren't even worthy to wipe the ass of!"

"I'm a soldier, you arrogant piece of shit! Maybe you forgot about what it means to have honor and respect. Maybe to you these words are part of a punch line but to me they're they only reason this filth infested planet we were left on functions. Fury was weak before the Byron Agency ever stepped into the equation, letting garbage like you take the lead in his field ops. Don't fool yourself, traitor. Without men like me you wouldn't even be alive."

The General's reply sunk into the pit of Wisdom's stomach, mixing with the anger and torment he had been going through for the last few weeks. The color red still hazed his vision as he made the decision to end it all.

Wisdom formed a package of condensed plasma in his right hand ten times the size of his normal shards. The enormous spike hummed with power as he heaved it over his head, Meyer's eyes nearly jumping out of their sockets. Thinking of all that the Byron Agency had ripped away from him, Wisdom plunged the giant dagger down into General Meyer, easily piercing his metallic hide.

"Agent!" Nick Fury called out to him. "Stand down!"

Wisdom looked through the broken wall to see the Colonel and

a dozen SHIELD troopers swarming around him, rifles raised and ready. Behind the troopers stood the last people Wisdom hoped to see: a very disgruntled Team X. He looked back down into Meyer's eyes, the tip of his spike centimeters from his face.

"It's over, Pete," Fury continued. "We've extracted the evidence from their intelligence routing complex. We've got everything we need to shut the bastards down permanently. Stand down."

Hesitantly, Wisdom allowed his energy weapon to fade away as he stood up straight again. The SHIELD contingent swept forward to secure the area while Fury strode toward his former agent, catching Meyer's eye in the process. Pure resentment passed between the two military figures as the Colonel ignored the impulse to unsheathe his own weapon put a round between the General's pupils.

"Kitty got the grid down that a few of the Byrons erected to keep us from using HERMES to 'port in," Fury explained. "I guess once Meyer stormed in with that ridiculous tank he decided to shut SHIELD out. Have you all to himself. Looks like that was a big mistake on his part."

"Peter!" Maverick yelled from the opposite side of the floor.

Wisdom turned to see Maverick and Siryn huddling around Lydia. He called out her name, fearing the worst as he bolted to her side.

"Hold on, luv," he whispered to her as he held her close. "You're still breathing...you'll be fine. I'm here with you. Don't worry..."

"We'll teleport a damn doctor in if we have to," Maverick said over his shoulder. "Just hang in there, Lydia."

Lydia locked her eyes on to Peter's and that was when he realized that there was nothing he could do. For his entire adult life, Peter Wisdom had been a man of action, someone who couldn't stand to sit by idly waiting for the other shoe to drop. To sit and watch the love of his life slip away...

"Find him for me," she muttered just loudly enough for only Peter to hear. "Find him for me and tell him how he'd be proud of me, of all of us for what we did today..."

"I will, luv, I promise. I love you."

The last glimmer of life faded from Lydia Del Ruiz's downcast eyes as Peter Wisdom gripped her as tight as he could. He gently rocked her back and forth and stroked her hair just as he had on so many of their quiet nights spent together.

He had taken many lovers during his lifetime but none had captivated him like Lydia. As she slipped away from him like a bird in flight, so too did a piece of his very soul.

---

## Epilogue I

"As for the last point of order, I call on SHIELD Director Fury to debrief this council on the status of the defunct black ops team, Codename: X-Force."

Fury made his way to the front of the meeting room, mixed emotions swirling inside of him ranging from somber to nostalgic. The men and women making up the council hated when he smoked his cigars during a debriefing but he didn't give a damn. He puffed away as he took his seat, knowing full well that the cigar was one of the few things keeping him from screaming obscenities at the pompous bureaucrats.

"Colonel," the same council member said, "where does SHIELD sit with its mutant operations initiative?"

"Team X members Bishop and Shard are maintaining their security positions, both now stationed in southern Canada," Fury began after a brief pause. "Shadowcat resigned, as X-Force was her original reason for returning in the first place. She may be taking this harder than most."

Irritated at the stares the council longingly gave him Fury finally swallowed his pride and stomped out his cigar on the oak desk before returning to his explanation. "The bodies of Marcus Raven and Lydia Del Ruiz are being held on one of our helicarriers until we can locate any family members. Given the limited amount of background information we have I'm leaning towards a motion that we bury them in Arlington."

"Even though their suspicion of terrorism--"

"With all due respect, sir, the information we obtained from the Byron Agency's intelligence routing center cleared all those charges. They deserve to be buried beside all the others that gave their lives for this country. Besides, Siryn will make sure that's what happens when she returns from medical leave on Muir Island. I'm not entirely convinced she'll be returning to active duty once she returns."

"And what of Peter Wisdom?"

"Extended vacation," Fury answered cryptically.

The board members murmured among themselves for a moment, casting wayward looks around the room. The various requisition reports before each of them had implied something more intricate than a mere vacation for the former Black Air agent, but the look on Fury's face told them that part of the debriefing was over.

"That's it then," another representative said. "Thank you for your invaluable service and faith toward this organization, Colonel. Also, congratulations are in order for your return to SHIELD as full time director. Consider our relationship with the Byron Security Agency at an end for good, as their funding has been returned and their contracts scrapped. Do you have any questions before we make a motion to dismiss this meeting?"

"Just one," Fury said as he stood. "What's the future of the X-Force project?"

---

## Epilogue II

The thrashed city of Hammer Bay served as a model for the way most of the civilized world viewed Genosha. Ruins, wreckage, debris, and dust were scattered amongst the entire city. A "refuge" for mutants, many of the humans outside its borders regarded the country as little more than a land of chaos. Looking around, Peter Wisdom could understand why.

Despite the worn appearance, Hammer Bay housed a fairly sophisticated prison, which was what Wisdom quickly found himself infiltrating. Using his advanced training in espionage, it had been easier than he suspected to gain entrance to the facility. Coming across the information he needed to point him at this particular prison, however, had been another matter entirely. He hated calling in favors like he had, but this was a promise he had to keep.

Wisdom slipped out of the sewer grate and bounced up into a crouch, hugging the wall of the corridor. If his intell had been correct, then the specific cell he was looking for should be right about...

"Here's your lunch, padre," a guard said as he passed the tray of food under the prison cell bars.

"For the last time," an older voice said from within the cell, "I'm not a padre. I'm just a spiritual leader that's gotten in over his head."

"Yeah, yeah, whatev--HYUK!"

The guard dropped like a sack full of potatoes from the precise chop Wisdom had delivered into one of his pressure points. Hurrying, Wisdom grabbed the keys from his belt and started rifling through them to find the one that opened the prison cell. The sound of the clanging metal reverberated throughout the dank prison as he searched, the older gentleman staring on in awe.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Your guardian angel," Wisdom replied. "And you're Mr. Del Ruiz, I presume?"

A soft click sounded as he turned the correct key in the lock. Jose Del Ruiz, father of the late Lydia Del Ruiz, stepped back as his cell door swung open. Wisdom looked him over before pulling out a pack of cigarettes, shaking it until one of the contents slipped out. Jose was stunned, completely unable to find any words to say to his supposed savior.

"We've got a lot to discuss, you and I," Peter said casually. "But first, let's get you out of this hellhole."

---

## THE END

---

## FORCING THE ISSUE

Well...that wraps up our run and just about all of the hanging plot threads. I had a great time scripting Cory's outlines and delving into the X-Universe. When I was younger, and just starting to get into comics, I always considered the X-Men and all their counterparts to be in their own little concise realm. I remember thinking how limited they seemed to be in their stories and the types of problems they faced (how many times can we hear about mutant rights?).

After working on X-Force I have completely reevaluated my naïve sentiments. These characters are rich with history and subtext, and I don't mind saying that writing some of them makes me wish to continue their adventures. I think X-Force is a perfect example of how characters typically grouped in with the stanch X-Men stories can branch out and really have an impact on the world.

Thanks to everyone who supported this endeavor and gave us your precious feedback. Stick around, because even though Cory and I are finished taunting Wisdom and the others, another prolific writer will be along shortly to mess with X-Force even more.

-D. Golightly  
11/18/06

---





**Pete  
Wisdom**



**Nick Fury**

---

### ***Arlington National Cemetery Arlington, Virginia***

Over two hundred and sixty thousand people are interred in the American military cemetery located on Memorial Drive. Peter Winston Wisdom stood before the graves of the two latest arrivals. One headstone read MARCUS RAVEN and the one beside it LYDIA DEL RUIZ. Marcus had been a good friend and an invaluable teammate to Wisdom. But Lydia had been something more.

Both were members of the now-defunct X-Force, a S.H.I.E.L.D.-sanctioned mutant strike force. Both were killed on the team's last mission, in an effort to clear themselves of treason charges. Colonel Nick Fury, the recently reinstated Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., made every effort to ensure that the pair were buried in Arlington.

The funeral had ended over an hour ago and Wisdom spent that time just standing over Lydia's grave, lost in his own thoughts. So much so that he did not notice the man who came up behind him.

"I see you're still here." He had short brown hair that was gray on the sides with a patch over his missing left eye. For once, he was clean-shaven and dressed in formal military attire.

Wisdom just wore a regular dress suit with his black trench coat over. He paid Fury no mind.

"It took some finagling, but I got the damn bureaucrats to see things my way," said Fury. "Don't care what anyone says, they both earned their places here."

"I want to go after him," said Wisdom.

"Who?"

"Lydia's father."

"You outta your mind?" asked Fury. "It was hard enough convincing everyone that you still deserve a place in S.H.I.E.L.D. I can't in good conscience send you on a nab an' grab in Genosha."

Wisdom turned sharply to Fury. "Who said I needed your permission?"

"Don't do anythin' stu—"

"It was the last thing she said to me," said Wisdom. "I gave her my word and I won't go back on it. So either you're with me or not, and I don't give a damn one way or the other."

"I thought you'd have trouble coping with this," said Fury.

"This isn't ab—"

"And because you'd have trouble coping, I've granted you an extended leave of absence to deal with your grief," said Fury. "You might wanna go somewhere warm. I hear Seychelles is nice this time o' year."

Wisdom smirked.

---

**Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents**

**The Return of Dino Pollard to**

**THE NEW DEAL  
Part One**

---

***Port Victoria  
Republic of Seychelles***

Prudence Leighton sat at a small outdoor café. Her fingers rapped on the table, one after another and she looked down at her watch.

2:30. Which meant he was late. He was always late.

She sighed and took a sip of her water. That was just like him. Arrange a meeting, telling her to be prompt, and then he's half an hour late. Prudence honestly couldn't say she was surprised. This was the kind of thing she was used to when dealing with the man.

"There's no bigger crime than a beautiful woman sitting alone."

Prudence turned her gaze to see a man with short black hair and a goatee sit across from her at the table. He wore a pair of khaki shorts and a Hawaiian shirt. Prudence raised an eyebrow at him. "Not exactly the attire I'd expect to see you in, Wisdom."

Wisdom produced a white pack of cigarettes with a small purple square on the box and the words "Silk Cut" printed inside the square. He drew one of

them out with his teeth and lit it with a Zippo lighter. Two fingers grasped the cigarette and he pulled it from his lips, exhaling the smoke as he said, "I'm on vacation."

"You're *never* on vacation," said Prudence. "Why did you want to meet me?"

"That's hurtful, Pru. You telling me a bloke can't look up an old friend without some sort of ulterior motive?" asked Wisdom.

"That's exactly what I'm saying when the 'bloke' in question is Pete Wisdom," said Pru.

As Wisdom took another drag on the cigarette, he signaled for the waiter to come by with his free hand. When the waiter arrived, Wisdom said, "get me a scotch."

"Scotch?" asked the waiter.

"Is there an echo?" asked Wisdom. The waiter rolled his eyes and went off to get the drink.

"Christ Pete, it's only 2:30," said Prudence.

"It's always happy hour somewhere, love."

"Scotch, though? I thought all you spies drank martinis."

"Don't get cute," said Wisdom.

The waiter came back with a small glass filled halfway with scotch and set it down on the table. Wisdom picked up the glass and drank without even acknowledging the waiter's presence. Once he was gone, Prudence spoke up. "Anyone ever tell you that you're a real asshole?"

"Matter of fact, yes. My father made it a habit to let me know every morning since my fifth birthday," said Wisdom.

The two just sat in silence for a few moments. Wisdom interchanged between sips of his scotch and puffs of his cigarette while Prudence kept her eyes on him carefully. She knew there was a reason he wanted to meet with her and she knew it involved a job. Pete Wisdom was always one to call in favors when it was least convenient.

"So how do you like it out here?" asked Wisdom.

"Can we cut the small talk bullshit?" asked Prudence. "Because I've got things to do. There's a reason you're in Victoria and I know it's not to look up a former conquest."

Wisdom smiled. "Admit it, you had fun, too."

Prudence shook her head and stood from the table. "Goodbye, Wisdom."

He leaned forward in his chair and grabbed her forearm. "Wait, hold up just a moment." Prudence sighed and sat back down.

"What is it?" she asked.

Wisdom leaned back in his chair and took another drag off his cigarette. "I need to get to Genosha."

At this, Prudence laughed. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope."

"I'm not sure if you remember or not, but after all the trouble you've caused down there, you're not exactly welcome," she said. "Something tells me Magneto won't be too happy to know you're traipsing about his country. I know you like living dangerously, but pick somewhere else for your vacation."

"It's for a job," said Wisdom.

"I knew it," said Prudence. She folded her arms across her chest. "You've always got some ulterior motive, Wisdom. S.H.I.E.L.D. can't get you in?"

"They could, if I was working for them on this," said Wisdom.

"You've gone rogue?"

"Bereavement leave."

Prudence lowered her eyes. "I heard you were seeing someone. I'm sorry."

"It happens," said Wisdom without a flinch.

She looked back up. "That why you're going into Genosha?"

"Her father's behind held there," said Wisdom.

"And you want to bring him out."

"I made a promise. I keep my word. I don't have much credit to myself, but I at least have that."

"I don't know if I can get you in," said Prudence. "You're asking me to really stick my neck out for you."

"Bollocks," said Wisdom. "Genosha's just north of Seychelles and you've got the contacts to get me there."

"Talk to Fury."

"I've given him enough headaches. This is a solo op."

"You're asking a lot. Too much."

"I've got no one else," said Wisdom. "No one I can trust, anyway."

"You don't trust anyone."

"Just answer the question: can you do it?"

Prudence sighed. "There's a cargo ship leaving tonight at 11:30. It's bound for Hammer Bay. Make sure you're on it."

"You're a saint," said Wisdom. He left some rupees on the table for the scotch and got up to leave.

"One more thing," she said. Wisdom looked down at her. "This is it. We're square now, okay?"

"Anything you say, love," said Wisdom.

---

### ***Hammer Bay Genosha***

Byron Calley was in over his head. That much he knew for certain.

When Magneto had been ceded control over Genosha, Calley and his other allies who composed the second incarnation of the Brotherhood came to the island. They hoped for some sort of position within Magneto's government. After all, they were loyal to him during the short period he led them and they stayed together and still fought for his goals.

Instead, they were given nowhere near as much prestige as Magneto's new followers, the Acolytes. The most they received was security detail. For Calley, who had once been known as Burner and later Crucible, it was a slap in the face.

It was why he found himself in a demilitarized zone in Hammer Bay, sitting at a bar and knocking back shots of Captain Morgan. He looked down at his watch. 10:00. The bastard was late.

Byron thought he should have checked with the rest of the group before he made this little rendezvous. But this contact said he had use for a man like Byron. Said the job was good, far better than the peanuts he was getting working security for the Hammer Bay Penitentiary.

A man slid onto the stool next to Byron and it was only a matter of seconds before Byron heard the click of a Zippo lighter and the smell of cigarette smoke. He brushed his long, silver hair behind his ear and turned his eyes to the man seated beside him. Short black hair, goatee. He

turned his dark eyes to Byron and smiled.

"Get my friend here a full glass, on me." His accent was unmistakably British.

"You want anything?" asked the barkeep.

"Scotch."

"What kind?"

"Whatever you've got, mate," he said.

The barkeep nodded and produced a glass and a bottle. He filled it halfway with scotch and slid it in front of the Englishman. He took out another glass and filled it with Captain Morgan and set it in front of Byron.

"So why did you want to meet me?" asked Byron.

"Y'know, I'm feelin' a bit crowded here. How about we grab ourselves a table?"

The Englishman stood and walked to a small round table in the back. Byron picked up his glass and followed suit. The lighting was low and Byron could barely make out the man's features. He assumed that's the way the man wanted it.

"Mind telling me why I'm here?" asked Byron.

"Word has it you used to run with Magneto in the old days. Part of the Brotherhood, am I right?"

Byron shifted uncomfortably. "You might say that."

"Probably be more accurate if I said the forgotten Brotherhood. The first incarnation... well, they were the first. Then Mystique's group launched a very strong opening salvo to get their name out. But you lot? Not even a footnote in the mutant history books."

Byron felt his temperature rising and he clutched the glass tightly. His powers were unconsciously starting to activate and the rum inside the glass began to heat up.

"Watch it, mate—alcohol had a tendency to be flammable."

"What do you want?" asked Byron.

"You and your boys came down to Genosha hoping to be set up for life. Instead, you get security detail that pays shit. Must not feel too good, huh?"

"Look, I don't know what your deal is, but I'm in no mood to be insulted

tonight. So if that's the only reason you asked me to meet you here, then I'm leaving."

"Actually, it's not. I've got a proposition for you."

"Then speak fast, because I'm in no mood for bullshit," said Byron.

"I represent people who'd like to see Magneto take a fall. Problem is, that would leave a power vacuum and who knows what might happen then. Much as people don't like the idea of Magneto running the show, they know that if he fell from grace, there'd be another civil war. That's something no one wants."

Byron took a sip of his rum. "I'm listening."

"I'm sure you are. And I'm sure your mates would appreciate this offer, too. What we need is a coup. Now, the Resistants may not seem like much, but you lot have some power on your side. Train with one of our operatives and we can get Magneto out of the way and set you boys up to be the big guys in charge."

"So you want us to be your puppets?" asked Byron.

"Are you that attached to your freedom as it is?" asked the Englishman.

Byron considered the man's words. He definitely made some good points. The Resistants were sick of slumming for Magneto for what was basically slave wages. Security detail was not all it was cracked up to be. And the others weren't faring too well, either. Hell, Peepers had already tried to kill himself once and was hopped up on anti-depressants.

"You want something else," said Byron.

"Call it a test," said the Englishman. "I need to get into the prison. There's a prisoner there, someone I want out."

"Who?" asked Byron.

"Jose Del Ruiz."

"Out of the question," said Byron. "There's no way I can get him out without someone noticing. And then I'd be dead before you know it."

He took a drag on the cigarette. "I'm not asking you to get him out."

"So what are you asking me?"

"Clear a path. Make sure some posts are abandoned at a certain time. Maybe a brief power outage. Something. I only need a small window to get in and out. Anything else, I can handle on my own."

"That's still asking a lot," said Byron.

“But think about what you’re getting in return.”

Byron rubbed his chin in thought and he glanced around the bar, ensuring no one was listening in on their conversation or watching them too closely.

“Okay, I’ll do it.”

---

## FORCING THE ISSUE

Honestly, this is the one title I never expected to return to. It’s been years since I left this title with issue #8 of the first volume. Jay Corafa and I launched this title back when M2K first opened its doors and we had a short run before David Wheatley took over and steered *X-Force* in its new direction.

When Cory and I first started talking several months back about my potential return to M2K, we discussed me working on a few different books. But it wasn’t until about two or three months ago that *X-Force* came up in discussion. Wheatley had just left the book and Cory and Dave Golightly were wrapping up his plots.

Cory, Golightly and I discussed the direction my run would go in and all of us were in agreement—we wanted a stronger focus on the espionage side of the mutant world. And that’s what you’re going to get here. The *X-Force* team itself will also be restructured and there will be some familiar faces and some unfamiliar ones. The new line-up will be revealed very shortly. So with any luck, you guys will enjoy it.

Dino Pollard  
November 25th, 2006

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**



**Bishop**



**Shadowcat**



**Maverick**



**Siryn**



**Shard**

---

### ***Berlin, Germany***

Christoph Nord, or David North as he had taken to calling himself over the course of many years, sat undisturbed at an outdoor café. A cup of coffee sat on the table beside him, and he wore a pair of sunglasses while focusing on the book in his hands. He had been granted a leave of absence from S.H.I.E.L.D. after the deaths of his teammates, Marcus Raven and Lydia Del Ruiz. The man called Maverick had chosen to spend that leave in his home country.

Unfortunately though, it was not always easy to escape the call of duty, a fact North was about to be reminded of. He could tell she was approaching and he didn't even look up from his book when he said, "Hello Terry."

Theresa Rourke, or Siryn as she was called in the field. A young Irishwoman and the daughter of Sean Cassidy, a man who was a hero at one time in his life. She planted herself in the empty chair and crossed her legs.

"How'd yeh know it was me?" she asked.

North marked his spot in the book and removed his sunglasses. "Your perfume. After all this time with S.H.I.E.L.D., I would have expected you to be able to sneak up on someone by now."

"Who said I was trying to sneak up on you, Mav?" she asked, utilizing the nickname he had picked up over the years. "What are yeh readin'?"

"*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*," said David. "It's a John le Carré novel."

"Spy novel, eh?" asked Terry. "Can never get away, even when on vacation, huh?"

"Guess not," said David. "But what's going on? I doubt you came all the way to Berlin just to discuss my reading habits."

"We've been given an assignment," said Terry.

"I'm on leave."

"It's important," said Terry. "Some terrorists with ties to Sinister have been makin' waves. Bishop and Shard have a lead on them an' they need back-up."

"I'm sorry, but I'm really not interested Terry," said David. "I want to enjoy the rest of my vacation while it lasts."



**Mystique**



**Nick Fury**

"Mav, please. This is my last job," she said.

This caught David's attention. "You're leaving?"

Terry nodded. "After Lydia and Marcus... I can't do it anymore. X-Force has too many bad memories for me. Fury asked me to help out on this final job. After that, I'm done. But I wanted either yeh or Wisdom there, and Fury says he hasn't been able to reach Wisdom."

David sighed. "I don't know... I'm still not sure if I'm ready to jump back into action just yet."

Terry reached a hand out and gently placed it on David's own hand. She looked at him with pleading eyes. "Please David."

"Fine," said David. "When do we leave?"

---

**Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents**

**The Return of Dino Pollard to**



**THE NEW DEAL  
Part Two**

---

***United Nations***

"Is this a good idea, Colonel?"

Colonel Nick Fury, Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., sat in a meeting with the United Nations Security Council. He removed a cigar from the jacket of his military suit. Before he could light it, someone else spoke up.

"Colonel, there's no smoking in here."

Fury rolled his eye and placed the cigar back in his jacket. "I'm positive, it's a great idea," he said. "These Dark Riders have been posing problems for you. Now, I know you don't wanna get involved in Iraq, but

superhuman forces pose a problem. So my team goes in, neutralizes the threat, and then they're gone."

"I don't trust this, Colonel. Why not utilize Excalibur?"

"Too high-profile," said Fury. "Team X is used to more covert operations. They can handle a smash and grab like this."

"Some of these operatives you've selected for Team X were recently accused of treason."

"And those charges were dropped," said Fury. "Trust me, they can do the job."

---

### ***Hammer Bay, Genosha***

Pete Wisdom stood on the balcony of his hotel, a lit cigarette dangling from his nicotine-stained fingers. His room looked out over Magda Square, the official center of Genosha. Magneto's citadel could be viewed off in the distance and Wisdom puffed on the cigarette while contemplating his current course of action.

He had won over Byron Calley with ease. Now it was time to begin the next phase of his plan. Wisdom wondered just how long it would be until Magneto was taken down. Although other supervillains had their own nations, Magneto was a bit more unpredictable than the likes of Doctor Doom.

Wisdom heard a knock at his door. He walked inside the room and set the cigarette down in an ashtray. When he arrived at the door, he looked through the peephole and saw a gorgeous young woman with dark hair and Mediterranean features, dressed in a short skirt and tube top.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Your friend thought you might like a personal visit," she said.

"Which friend?" asked Wisdom.

"Said his name was Nick."

Fury? Wisdom had his doubts about the situation, but he also had another thought. He opened the door and motioned for the young woman to enter. She smiled at him and stepped into the room. "Thank you."

Wisdom closed the door behind her and leaned against it, folding his arms across his chest. "So... Nick sent you, hmm?"

"That's right," she said. She looked at the bed. "So how do you wanna do this?"

Wisdom stepped up to her and wrapped his arms around her. One of his hands gripped her hair and he pushed her towards him, pressing his lips to hers. It was a kiss that had confirmed his suspicions. He pulled her away and threw her against the wall.

"Like it rough, I see," she said. Wisdom pushed her up against the wall. He lifted up his free hand and pointed at her. The tip of his finger extended into a white-hot finger knife, pointed directly at the woman's forehead.

"What say we drop the act, Raven?" he asked.

"What's wrong, Peter?" asked Raven. "The exotic look doesn't fly with you? Maybe the chestnut-haired innocent schoolgirl works?"

Her appearance shifted before his eyes, into a form he was far too familiar with—that of Katherine Pryde, the former X-Man called Shadowcat. And one of the few women Wisdom could actually say he was in love with. Raven's clothes also shifted, changing into a schoolgirl outfit.

"Are you *trying* to get me to kill you?" asked Wisdom.

"Sorry, perhaps *this* look?" asked Raven, her appearance changing again. Now it was the form of Lydia Del Ruiz. Wisdom clenched his teeth and pulled her away from the wall, throwing her to the floor. Raven's appearance changed yet again, this time assuming the form of the blue-skinned, red-haired woman Wisdom was used to her as. She regarded him with her yellow eyes and smiled. "Peter, Peter, Peter... we really *must* work on those rage issues you have."

"What do you want, Mystique?" he asked.

"The direct approach, I like that in a man." She pulled herself to her feet. "I think the question should be, what do *you* want? Why are you in Genosha?"

"Vacation," said Wisdom. "Heard it was nice this time of year."

"Genosha's not a nice place *any* time of year, at least not for you," said Mystique.

"How's it feel being Magneto's lackey?" asked Wisdom.

"I'll ask again—what are you doing here?"

"Unfinished business," said Wisdom. "That's all you need to know."

"I see," said Mystique. She sat down on the bed and crossed her legs.

"Nice mattress. A bit big for one person, don't you think? Expecting company?"

"Nah, I just like to stretch out," said Wisdom. He motioned to a bottle of Cutty Sark and two empty glasses. "Drink?"

"Sure."

He dropped a few ice cubes in each glass and poured the scotch into both. Wisdom handed one glass to Mystique before he sat next to her on the bed. "How'd you know I was here?" he asked.

"That bar you were in last night," said Mystique. "The barkeep is a friend of mine."

"So why come to my room? And why in harlot skin? High muck-a-muck in the Genoshan cabinet should be able to go where she pleases," said Wisdom. "Unless you were just lookin' for a shag, not thinking I'd be able to tell it was you."

"Don't flatter yourself. Despite the Sean Connery routine you always play, you're no James Bond," said Mystique.

"Don't recall hearing any complaints from you."

"That's because you fell asleep before I had the chance to say anything," said Mystique. "And I didn't want to arouse any suspicion. If one of Magneto's cabinet comes into a hotel looking for someone in particular, that draws a lot of attention. I have no interest in drawing any undue attention to myself."

"And invoking Fury's name like that? How did you think I *wouldn't* know it was you?" asked Wisdom.

"Wisdom, if I didn't want you to know it was me, you wouldn't know—trust me on that," said Mystique. "Now tell me, why were you meeting with Byron Calley?"

"He's an old mate."

"Don't bullshit a bullshitter, it never works. I've been playing this espionage game since you were in diapers."

"Guess that makes you a cradle-robber," said Wisdom.

"And it makes you a motherfucker," said Mystique. "What's your point?"

Wisdom shrugged and sipped his drink.

"Calley works at the prison, doesn't he?" asked Mystique.

"You tell me."

"He does, and I've already checked the prison records," said Mystique.  
"Jose Del Ruiz."

"You say that name like it means something to me."

"Oh come on," said Mystique with a tone of frustration. She walked over to the table where Wisdom left his cigarettes and drew one from the pack. "Let's stop acting like I was born yesterday." She placed the cigarette between her lips and looked around. "Light?"

Wisdom walked over to her and held up his middle finger. The tip of it turned to hot plasma. Mystique gave him an annoyed look. "Cute," she said. She held the cigarette over the fingertip and within seconds, smoke rose from the end.

Wisdom chuckled. "Okay, for argument's sake let's say I *am* going after Del Ruiz. What's it to you?"

"He's a troublemaker."

"He's an activist. I break him out, smuggle him out of the country, what can he do?"

"We have laws here."

"Says the former terrorist," said Wisdom.

"One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. You should know that better than anyone," said Mystique.

"So what are you gonna do?" asked Wisdom. "Arrest me?"

"I actually have something else in mind," said Mystique.

Wisdom smiled. "I'm listening."

---

### ***S.H.I.E.L.D. Helicarrier***

A marvel of modern technology. The Helicarrier remains in flight in international airspace, allowing the Strategic Hazard Intervention and Espionage Logistics Directorate to owe absolutely no allegiance to any single country. They answer only to the United Nations.

In one of the Helicarrier's operations rooms, Fury stood in front of a round table that included the five mutants he had assembled for Team X. In the center of the table was a holographic projection of desert terrain. Each of

the members of Team X had a folder in front of them, filled with photographs and information on their targets.

He was confident in the team he had selected. Katherine Pryde, called Shadowcat. David North, Maverick. Theresa Rourke, Siryn. Bishop. Shard. All of them had served as members of X-Force in the past, but with all the bad press assigned to that name, Fury chose to recycle the Team X label he had used in the past.

"Inside, you'll find the information you need on the Dark Riders," said Fury. "Dust, Gryphon, Downtime, Amun, and their leader, Post. What little intel we have on them says that they have ties to Sinister. Whether or not they're still working with him remains to be seen. Post is potentially the most dangerous of the entire team. All the others are relatively new to this game. Take out Post and the rest should fall without too much difficulty."

"Where's the drop?" asked Maverick.

"Just south of Baghdad," said Bishop.

"Iraq? I thought the U.N. didn't want S.H.I.E.L.D. involved over there," said Shadowcat.

"They don't, an' they also don't want any superhuman intervention," said Fury. "The place has enough instability without mutant assassins running around. But apparently the Dark Riders have gone freelance and they've been contracted to stir some shit up. So the U.N. is allowing to overlook S.H.I.E.L.D. and superhuman involvement in this instance. We just have to keep it limited to the Dark Riders. And avoid being seen. Shard?"

"Through our contacts, we've discovered that the Riders are holed up in a training camp near Baghdad," said Shard. "We go in, nab them, and get out. Keep damage to a minimum and try not to cause too much noise. Err... figuratively speaking, Siryn."

"We've got the HERMES system powered up and ready for deployment," said Fury. "Bishop, you're the field commander of this op, you wanna take it from here?"

"We go in with two waves," said Bishop. "Wave one will be Shard and Shadowcat. Shadowcat's intangibility will allow them to slip in unnoticed. They'll handle most of the wetworks, disable whatever security may pose a threat. Just disable, we want to keep this bloodless to avoid any accusations of U.N. involvement on either side of the Iraqi conflict."

"That also means no S.H.I.E.L.D. threads, obviously," said Shard.

"Wave two will be Maverick, Siryn and myself," continued Bishop. "Once Shard and Shadowcat have finished their task, we come in with guns blazing. The Dark Riders won't be easy to take out, so we have to move fast. Since Post's attacks are energy-based, leave him to me."

"Get in contact with us the second you've got the Riders contained and we'll transport you out with the HERMES," said Fury.

"Suit up, people," said Bishop. "We've got a job to do."

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**



**Bishop**



**Shadowcat**



**Maverick**



**Siryn**



**Shard**

---

## ***Iraq***

Near Baghdad was a training camp for insurgents in Iraq. This particular camp had five extra occupants than normal, five mutants who possessed destructive powers. The United Nations wanted S.H.I.E.L.D. to stay out of the Iraqi conflict.

But now, a team of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents had been dispatched to invade the camp. A simple smash and grab operation. Nothing the members of Team X shouldn't be able to handle on their own.

The first two operatives were Katherine Pryde, called Shadowcat and the woman known as Shard. Both were dressed in uniforms that bore no insignia. It was necessary in order to avoid accusations of U.N. and S.H.I.E.L.D. involvement in the war.

Two sentries stood guard. Shard and Shadowcat were left invisible thanks to the suits projecting stealth camouflage. The feature unfortunately would not last long, but it would last long enough to get them inside.

Shard possessed the mutant ability to absorb ambient light particles and transubstantiate it into concussive energy blasts. Thanks to the hot, Middle Eastern sun, she was charged with plenty of energy. She fired off two blasts from each hand, quickly eliminating the sentries.

The two women ran forward and linked hands as they approached one of the buildings. Shadowcat utilized her own power and the molecules inside their bodies became unstable, allowing them to phase through the wall.

The camouflage flickered as the two women came into view. Shadowcat gave a few hand signals and Shard nodded, acknowledging the command. Shard went in one direction while Shadowcat phased through the ground, falling to the floors below.

Shard pressed her back up against the wall and carefully peered around the corner. The coast was clear, for now. She had memorized the floor plan before they left the Helicarrier. There was a room just down the hallway with access to an air duct. Shard moved carefully and found that room.

She pulled the grate from the duct and crawled inside. It was cramped and narrow and she was surprised she could even fit. Slowly, she crawled through the duct, her eyes lighting up with energy and guiding her path.

A T-junction was just ahead. Shard took the left path. With every vent she came across, she powered down and carefully peered out. So far, nothing of any targets. Still, she continued on her trek until she looked through one of the vents and saw a Dark Rider looking over some schematics.

The Rider in question was Amun. Formerly a student of the Exiles. He



**Mystique**



**Dark Riders**

possessed the ability to absorb mutant DNA signatures. That made him a dangerous chimera, if he was given a chance.

Shard didn't intend give him said chance.

She kicked open the vent and Amun immediately spun in his surprise. The S.H.I.E.L.D. agent moved quickly, falling from the ceiling and unleashing several concussive blasts.

Amun twisted and dodged them. The two faced off against each other, Shard with her hands and eyes crackling with energy. Amun needed to make physical contact with her to fuel his abilities, and that was not something Shard was prepared to do.

The former Exile lunged forward. As he came upon her, Shard grabbed his wrists and allowed herself to go with his momentum. She used his own force against him and he flew over her head. Shard fired off several concussive blasts in repetition, each one striking and sending him crashing into the stone wall. She leaned down by him and saw that he was unconscious. Her hand went to the earpiece she wore.

"Egypt has fallen," she said, utilizing the code they had decided on before the mission.

---

**Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents**

**The Return of Dino Pollard to**



**THE NEW DEAL  
Part Three**

---

***Genosha***

Randall Darby paced in the security center of the Genoshan prison. Byron Calley sat before the monitors, watching them intently.

"This is suicide, y'know that right?" said Randall.

"No, it's a smart move," said Byron. "We discussed this already. Don't get cold feet now."

"C'mon Byron, don't be an idiot," said Randall. "If we get caught, Magneto will have our heads."

"We won't get caught," said Byron. "Trust me on this."

"Who's this contact of yours anyway?" asked Randall.

"He's someone who can help, that's all you need to know," said Byron.

"But Del Ruiz? Getting him out is going to pose a problem."

"I know what I'm doing," said Byron. "What's the time?"

Randall looked at the clock on the wall. "Twelve thirty."

"Time to go to work," said Byron.

"I don't like this."

"I don't care if you like it or not, you agreed to it," said Byron. "Now come on."

Randall sighed. He walked up to the fuse box and opened it with a hand that resembled a lobster claw. He gripped the wires inside and his mutant ability to generate bioelectricity kicked on. The destructive energy flowed from his claws into the wires, overloading them.

All the lights in the prison went out.

---

## ***Iraq***

*"Doors are open."*

The voice was Shadowcat's, notifying Bishop via earpiece that security was disabled. Bishop looked at Siryn and pointed towards the base. The young Irish woman nodded and opened her mouth, emitting a high-frequency sonic that lifted her into the air.

She used that frequency to propel herself forward through the air. As she approached the base, she shifted the sound she emitted. A sonic masking field enveloped the small area, preventing any sound from exiting or entering.

Bishop and Maverick followed on foot, both with weapons drawn. As soon as they approached the camp, a sandstorm erupted, the particles moving so fast that they were razor-sharp. Both men knew from the briefing that this was the work of Dust, one of the Dark Riders.

The uniforms they wore utilized special material developed by the mutant Forge, acting as a form of body armor. If not for that, the two men would have their skin cut to the bone.

Bullets sliced through the air and both Bishop and Maverick moved for cover. The Sentinel/human hybrid called Gryphon was the cause of it, utilizing her nanotech body to fire off round after round. Maverick and Bishop both returned fire, but their weapons seemed to do little damage to Gryphon.

As they returned fire, the bullets started to travel slower and slower, courtesy of Downtime. Another former Exile, she was able to affect the flow of time itself and she moved through the field, disarming both Maverick and Bishop before she could no longer sustain the effect.

Maverick and Bishop expressed shock at the sudden loss of their weapons, before they found themselves dodging the rounds from their own guns, now wielded by Downtime.

Another figure emerged from the camp, this one the largest of the Riders. He had blue skin and was covered with metallic plates of some sort. Weapons hovered around him. This was Post, the leader of the Dark Riders. His guns fired energy blasts and Bishop charged towards him, allowing the gunfire to strike his body.

Bishop fell to his knees and looked up at Post, his eyes glowing. "Big mistake."

---

### ***Genosha***

With the power in the prison disabled, it gave Wisdom the opportunity he needed. He had gained entrance to the prison through the sewer system. Not exactly his preferred form of travel, but it would get the job done.

Wisdom slipped out of the sewer grate and bounced up into a crouch, hugging the wall of the corridor. If his intel had been correct, then the specific cell he was looking for should be right about...

"Here's your lunch, padre," a guard said as he passed the tray of food under the prison cell bars.

"For the last time," an older voice said from within the cell, "I'm not a padre. I'm just a spiritual leader that's gotten in over his head."

"Yeah, yeah, whatev--HYUK!"

The guard dropped like a sack full of potatoes from the precise chop Wisdom had delivered into one of his pressure points. Hurrying, Wisdom grabbed the keys from his belt and started rifling through them to find the

one that opened the prison cell. The sound of the clanging metal reverberated throughout the dank prison as he searched, the older gentleman staring on in awe.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Your guardian angel," Wisdom replied. "And you're Mr. Del Ruiz, I presume?"

A soft click sounded as he turned the correct key in the lock. Jose Del Ruiz, father of the late Lydia Del Ruiz, stepped back as his cell door swung open. Wisdom looked him over before pulling out a pack of cigarettes, shaking it until one of the contents slipped out. Jose was stunned, completely unable to find any words to say to his supposed savior.

"We've got a lot to discuss, you and I," Peter said casually. "But first, let's get you out of this hellhole."

---

### ***Iraq***

Shadowcat phased through the ground and lunged for Gryphon. Since the woman's body was enhanced by nanotechnology, that made her vulnerable to Shadowcat's abilities. As Shadowcat phased through the Rider, her powers disrupted the technology in Gryphon's body.

The woman began to convulse as what could only be described as a seizure overcame her body. With her systems shut down like that, Gryphon fell to the ground unconscious.

Nearby, Bishop's ability to absorb and rechannel energy was working to full effect. The power from Post's attack had charged up Bishop's cells. He leapt forward, the energy ready to explode from his fingertips.

Once Bishop connected his fist with Post's jaw, energy flew out. With each strike Bishop delivered, more and more energy was expelled. He battered the leader of the Dark Riders until the former herald of Onslaught fell to the ground.

---

Inside the base, Shard held a small device no larger than a pen in her hand. It emitted a wide, blue light that she scanned over the documents Amun had been looking at. She had no time to look over the documents, so she would just have to settle for the intel she was gathering and deliver it to Fury.

She heard Shadowcat's transmission that security had been disabled. And judging from the ruckus she now heard, she knew that the rest of Team X were battling the Dark Riders.

Shard's mission was far more important however. S.H.I.E.L.D. knew that the Dark Riders were connected to something bigger, but just what that was remained a mystery for now.

After she scanned the last document, Shard replaced the small pen-like object in a pouch on her belt. It was a scanner that saved the documents as digital files S.H.I.E.L.D. could examine later. But she hadn't intended to leave the documents lying around.

Shard gathered the documents into a pile and produced a small lighter. With it, she lit the papers on fire and watched as the flames converted the documents into ash. She smiled as she spoke into the earpiece.

"Flame on."

---

### ***Genosha***

Wisdom and Jose Del Ruiz exited through the sewer system he had come in from. As they made their way through the tunnels, Jose had been able to maintain his silence. They came to a series of tunnels and Wisdom led Jose down one of them, moving through the muck, walking past rats.

Once they were far enough away, Jose figured it was safe to talk. "Can you tell me who you are?"

"Pete Wisdom," he said.

"And why are you risking your life to break me out of prison?" asked Jose.

"It was a promise I made to your daughter," said Wisdom.

"Lydia? Where is she?" asked Jose.

"Not now," said Wisdom.

Jose grabbed the collar of Wisdom's shirt. "Tell me!"

Wisdom stopped and pried the man's fingers from his collar. "Like I said, I promised your daughter I'd get you out of prison. But let's get a few things straight—I got you out, I never specified what condition I'd leave you in or how far out I'd take you. So you do as I say when I say it and you'll be sipping mojitos in Cuba before you know it. But if you give me any more lip, if you ever bloody touch me again, I'll either leave you for the magistrates or I'll kill you myself."

Wisdom dropped his cigarette to the ground and it sizzled as it struck the sewer water. "Do we understand each other, Mr. Del Ruiz?"

"We do," said Jose.

"Good," said Wisdom. "Now keep moving. My contact isn't far from here."

They continued through the sewer in silence. When they came out of a drainage pipe at the end, they were right by the shore. A motorboat approached on the night waters, driven by a brunette. Once Wisdom caught sight of her, he shook his head and hopped into the boat. He helped Jose in as well.

"What did I tell you about looking like her?" asked Wisdom.

Mystique changed her shape from that of Katherine Pryde to a woman with long, blonde hair. She smiled at Wisdom. "You used to like it when I got a rise out of you."

"Don't get cheeky," said Wisdom. He lit a fresh cigarette.

"The others?" asked Mystique.

"All set up," said Wisdom.

---

In the prison, two other Resistants walked through the halls—Mist Mistress and Peeper. The stocky Peeper led the way, his unique mutation allowing him to see in the dark. As soon as they came to the cell they were looking for, Mist Mistress took advantage of her own powers.

She extended her hand and a chemical agent was released from her fingertips, one which created an acidic mist. This mist chewed through the lock on the cell door and it opened easily.

Mist Mistress and Peeper stepped inside the cell. But they didn't find Jose Del Ruiz. Instead, they found one of their fellow guards, knocked unconscious.

"What?" asked Peeper.

The lights in the facility suddenly turned back on. Mist Mistress and Peeper exited the cell, only to find magistrates with weapons trained on them.

---

### ***Iraq***

All the Riders save for Dust had been dealt with. Shard's transmission indicated that now they were ready to go. Siryn dropped the masking field and dove back to the battle.

Her vocal chords emitted a different frequency this time. This one was directed specifically at Dust and the harmonics employed created a hallucinatory sensation in the young Saudi.

It generated a hypnotic effect and Dust slowly coalesced into a single form and willingly entered a containment unit held by Shadowcat. The young woman shut it, trapping Dust inside.

The members of Team X gathered close together with the fallen Dark Riders. Bishop spoke into his earpiece. "HERMES transport by ten."

The transport locked onto their signal via GPS and the ten mutants vanished in a flash of light.

---

### ***Indian Ocean***

The boat traveled far enough from Genosha to be in international waters. As they continued to ride, Jose looked to Wisdom and Mystique.

"Are you going to tell me about my daughter yet?" he asked.

Wisdom and Mystique exchanged glances. Wisdom took a drag on his cigarette before speaking. "Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but Lydia's passed on."

"What?"

"She's dead," said Mystique.

The color drained from Jose's face. He opened his mouth to speak but silence came forth. It took him a moment to form his words. "But... how? What happened?"

"It's a long story, most of it classified information," said Wisdom. "Needless to say, she's gone. I'm sorry."

"So now what do I do?" asked Jose. "I'm a criminal in Genosha and the only family I had is gone."

"When we get to Port Victoria, you'll go with a colleague of mine, Prudence Leighton," said Wisdom. "She's good people, she'll set you up with a new identity and a new life."

"And you're doing this all out of the goodness of your heart?"

"Not quite," said Wisdom. "I promised Lydia I'd release you from prison, but I never said anything about setting you up with a new identity in another country. From this point on, you work for me. Mostly, you'll just go about your daily activities. But one day, I'll get in touch with you. And then you'll have to do something for me. This will be your form of repayment. If you can't deal with that, then Raven here will stop the boat and you can swim to shore."

"I can deal with that," said Jose.

"Smart boy," said Wisdom.

"So where are you setting me up?" asked Jose.

Wisdom smiled. "Remember the crack I made in the tunnels about Cuba?"

---

**NEXT:** *A new X-Force rises from the ashes of the old. Who stays? Who goes? Who gets recruited? Find out soon.*

---

### FORCING THE ISSUE

First off, just one small note. The scene where Wisdom frees Jose Del Ruiz will look familiar to some, and that's because it's the scene Cory and Dave wrote in their last issue. I tried writing my own version of this escape, but it didn't do any justice, so I chose to use their scene.

Second, I made a little continuity gaff. In the last issue, I mistakenly said that Mystique was a member of Magneto's cabinet. Brent *Fallen Angels* Lambert was kind enough to inform me that she's not a cabinet member, more of a liason there on behalf of S.H.I.E.L.D. So my apologies to Brent for that mistake.

Third, I forgot to respond to the comments from issue #13. So here's the reviews from one-third of our EiC collective, Cory Wiegel:

***THE GOOD: Unfortunately, X-Force has sort of lost its way in recent years. The original concept was as a team of mutant spies working for S.H.I.E.L.D., but as time went on it sort of turned a bit more into something akin to a mutant police force. I like the former better and I'm glad to see that Dino's returned to it. He's able to pick up from David Golightly and I's brief wrap-up stint quite efficiently, building off of our final story and the title's past stories but not quite being bound by it.***

I admit that when I sat down to write issue #13, I had a lot of trouble getting started. Mainly because I had so many ideas running through my mind and I had no idea where to start. Thankfully, I got over that hump extremely quickly and had a blast pounding out these first three issues. The mutant police force angle is fine and dandy, but like you I've always felt there's much more to be done with the mutant spy angle. Especially since the mutant police force angle is a pretty common angle to take.

***Pete Wisdom's a guarded, clever, and forward thinking spy, but you get the idea that there's a definite depth to his character that makes for interesting dissection. Daniel Craig's James Bond, anyone? The spy genre is also appropriately explored with a slow***

***but engaging build to the action, giving us readers time to let the story and its various dynamics sink in before any explosions or gun fights go off.***

Funny you should mention Craig's Bond. He's actually a big source of inspiration for my depiction of Pete Wisdom. In fact, when I was working on the proposal as well as prior to writing the first issue, I got some inspiration by watching some of the darker Bond flicks like *Dr. No*, *From Russia With Love*, *Licence to Kill*, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* and, of course, *Casino Royale* as well as other espionage movies like *Munich* and *Spy Game*. Wisdom's definitely an interesting character and easily the strongest part of *X-Force*. That'll especially come out down the line when you see just how much of a bastard he can be.

***THE BAD: I've said it before and I'll say it again: Dino's issues are just too damn short for my tastes. In the case of X-Force #13, there are enough scenes and enough story in the scenes to be sufficient for a typical issue, but the lack of exposition and prose left me feeling a little underwhelmed. I'm from the school of thought that goes, "if you can't satisfy the reader with more prose then you should satisfy them with more story." I would say that this issue needed to have about two or three more scenes of story to leave me with a "full" feeling, or in other words be about twice as long as it is.***

To each his own, I guess. I've beefed up the word count a bit, so hopefully this issue will be more to your liking as far as length goes.

***OVERALL: Despite the lack of prose and general shortness of the issue, I'm quite pleased with what I've read. Dino's second run on this title, continuing with the vastly different concept conceived by David Wheatley after Dino's first run, is starting off much better than his original run with Jay Corafa nearly six years ago. If Dino can beef up his writing (or his story) next issue and continue his engaging portrayal of Wisdom and the spy genre, as well as all of the elements involved in this title, I think Marvel 2000 will have another must read title in the works. Good job, Dino!***

Yeah, this is definitely a completely different animal from what *X-Force* was when Jay and I first launched it all those years ago. And I think it's much better this way. While I had fun writing those issues with Jay, the title itself lacked direction. Now, there's much more cohesion in the concept.

Now for Cory's comments on issue #14:

***This was largely a set-up issue, which isn't bad by any means, but eh... it kind of inherently has a drawback or two, especially with Dino's typical writing length. The most interesting part of this issue was the interaction between Pete Wisdom and Mystique. I***

***think they both have a lot of chemistry and play off of each other very nicely, thanks largely to Dino's efforts, and I look forward to seeing a lot more of the two. This is the sort of stuff I want to see a lot more of in the series.***

I'm glad this is the kind of stuff you want to see more of in the series, because you definitely will. Although the previous incarnations of *X-Force* were largely action-oriented, this one won't be. In many ways, this could just as easily be a *Wisdom* series because the other members of the team will be in more supporting roles whereas *Wisdom* will be the main focus.

*Mystique* especially will play a big role, if not right away. But she's one character I really wanted for this book and I'm glad I was able to get my hands on her. And her current set-up in Genosha makes for some interesting opportunities.

***The least interesting part of the issue was the briefing of Team X. Part of me wonders if it was really necessary and probably would have preferred it if Dino went straight to the mission. After all, everything we were told and shown in this scene we could have found out and saw as the mission kicked off (only in a more interesting way), so it seemed like a little bit like filler. I think it's important for Dino not to waste any one scene with his issue lengths because then us readers can walk away having expected more.***

I guess I can understand the logic behind that, but as you can see from this issue, the mission was a big part of it and I wanted to have the juxtaposition of *Wisdom*'s mission with Team X's. So hopefully the pay-off was worth it.

***Heh, oh, and did anyone else think that it was kind of funny to read about a gruff, ex-soldier of fortune drinking coffee and reading a book in an outside cafe? I always took Maverick as the type to be drinking a beer and watching a football or soccer game in a sports bar. Minor quibble, especially since I was happy to see Maverick and Siryn have a moment to interact outside of the line of duty. Overall, kind of a slow issue and a little uneventful in my opinion, but otherwise a solid read by Dino. I'm hoping for a lot more Wisdom/Mystique dynamics next ish and some explosive Team X action.***

Because it's expected of Maverick to be drinking a beer and watching a soccer game is exactly why I chose not to do it. I didn't just want to play into a typical stereotype with him and Maverick's private life has never been explored in too much depth. So I thought it'd be more fun to play with conventions and have him relaxing at an outdoor café. Although the book he was reading shows that Mav's not exactly the type to completely leave work behind.

That's it for this one. Next issue will provide the epilogue to "The New Deal" and will firmly set up the new direction.

-Dino

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**

Peter Winston Wisdom walked through the halls of the Helicarrier, dressed in a white dress shirt, black slacks and a black trench coat. The collar was unbuttoned and the tie hung loosely around his neck. His face was slightly disheveled, the result of a flight from Africa to London. From there, he was quickly picked up by a SHIELD transport and brought back to the Helicarrier.

No rest for the wicked, he supposed.



**Maverick**

There was a door labeled DIRECTOR and Wisdom walked right inside, without bothering to request permission or even knock to signal his entrance. On the other side of the door, his boss sat behind a desk, a cigar between his lips, short brown hair that was gray at the temples and a patch to make up for his missing eye.

Colonel Nicholas Fury. Veteran of World War II. Imbued with the Infinity Formula to keep him young even after all these years and now, the Director of SHIELD.

"Ever hear of knockin'?"



**Nick Fury**

"Wouldn't want to ruin my reputation, Fury old son," said Wisdom. He walked over to a cabinet where he knew Fury kept a bottle of bourbon hidden. Wisdom raised a questioning brow at his commanding officer and Fury nodded. The British-born mutant procured two glasses and the bottle, pouring a little bourbon in each and handing one to Fury.

"So, what's the word?" asked Wisdom, taking a seat in a chair perched before Fury, wasting no time in propping his feet on the desk and making himself comfortable.



**Dust**

"How was your vacation?" asked Fury.

"Good times had by all," said Wisdom. "Got a chance to tie up some loose ends."

"What I like t' hear," said Fury. "You ready to return to active duty?"

"With SHIELD?" asked Wisdom. He chuckled. "I doubt you'd have me after all the trouble I've caused, Nicky."

"You're a good man, Wisdom and an even better operative. You're someone who can do a lot of good with SHIELD, but I think we've been wasting yer talents."

"Oh?" asked Wisdom.

Fury gulped down the bourbon between puffs of his Cuban cigar. "I played it wrong, Wisdom. I ain't proud to admit it, but I made a mistake. The idea of a mutant strike force? Sure, it's good in principle. Things have gotten

too public with us, though. It's time to go back to basics."

"What's that?"

"I spent most of my adult life in the Cold War, back when the world was a pretty scary place. You never knew who you could trust, so you trusted no one. Friends became enemies, enemies became friends. An' it was all in the name of keeping a balance. Half the time you didn't know if you were working for the good guys or the bad and you trusted your instincts. But after the Soviets were through, things changed. The bureaucrats and politicians took over and things just kept getting muddled with departmentalizing and compartmentalizing and whatever sort of 'partmentalizing you can think of. All this oversight has gotten in the way of us doin' the job we're supposed to do."

"I didn't come to listen to the rants of a war horse who misses the good ol' days," said Wisdom. "Get to the point, Fury."

"My point is that the whole reason we allowed things to get so fucked was because we weren't doin' our jobs. Genesis, Meyer, the Byrons—all just symptoms of the same problem. That we've been lettin' other people screw with us to the point that we're runnin' in circles and not doin' our jobs. And meanwhile, people are dying."

Wisdom finished off his bourbon and set the glass on the desk. He produced a cigarette and lit it. "Now what does this have to do with me?"

"You worked for British intelligence, Wisdom. You may have tried the superhero thing, but let's face it—you're more James Bond than Captain America. Always have been. Operating in the public like you have been, causing a lot of sound an' fury, that's not your style. Get in, do the job, get out. All without anyone ever knowin' you were there. That's what you're good at and you proved it in Genosha."

"Oh?" asked Wisdom.

Fury opened his desk drawer and pulled out a sheet of paper. He handed it to Wisdom. Pete saw it was an electronic reproduction of an article from a Genoshan newspaper. The Resistants were in the photograph and the headline read, PRISON STAFF CHARGED WITH TREASON.

Wisdom chuckled. Fury couldn't help smiling as well. "You're a bastard, Wisdom. You suckered these guys into helpin' you out and then you leave 'em behind to take the fall. See? That's the kinda shit you're good at and that's what X-Force has gotta be."

"X-Force?"

"I'm bringin' it back, but not in the same way," said Fury. "Your team will be hand-picked by you, just like before. Except this time, forget about any sort of public displays. You and yours will be operatin' completely in the shadows. You'll all be listed as agents of SHIELD, but aside from me no

one will know you exist."

Wisdom filled his lungs with smoke as he thought about what Fury was offering him. He hated to admit it, but Fury was right. Wisdom was a spy, not a superhero. He had no business running around in spandex, fighting off supervillains. He operated in the shadows, performing the dirty jobs nobody else wanted to do. It's what he was trained to do, what he was good at, and every time he tried to run from it, it always ended in disaster.

"I'm in," he said.

---

**Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents**

**The Return of Dino Pollard to**



**THE NEW DEAL  
Epilogue**

---

Wisdom sat in his apartment, drinking a glass of scotch while he looked over the files scattered about his table. Countless mutants to choose from, all of them probably well qualified for the jobs Fury wanted the new X-Force to undertake. The question was, how could Wisdom narrow down his choices?

He thought about some of the existing members, now affiliated with Team X. Bishop, Shard and Siryn were all out. Those three were more suited for a strike force, not spy work. Bishop had made a career out of it. Moreover, according to Siryn's file, she resigned from SHIELD—the mission in Iraq against the Dark Riders was her last job. Pete had no intention of trying to convince her to come back. He may have been a bastard, but he certainly wasn't that much of one.

That left two more choices—Katherine Pryde and David North. Shadowcat and Maverick, respectfully. Wisdom looked at the file photo of Pryde. He felt a longing, to try and repair the damage they had both done to each other over the years.

"Out," said Wisdom and he flicked the photograph away from him. It flew

across the room, striking the wall before it found a resting place face down on the floor. North on the other hand...

Wisdom liked North. He was a good man, a great soldier and had a lot of experience in espionage. He was a product of the Cold War and he probably understood those methods better than anyone else. Wisdom nodded, North would have to be on the team.

That made two members. There were others Wisdom needed to round out the group. And he kept thinking back to his trip in Genosha and to Mystique. There was no doubt about it, Raven Darkholme could get under any man's skin. But there was also no doubting that she was good at her job. Raven could assume the appearance of anyone and she was a natural actress, making it even easier for her to slip in and out of places with ease. She was also of... flexible morality, and those people made the best agents.

The problem was that Mystique was currently on-assignment in Genosha, serving as a liason between SHIELD and Magneto. It wouldn't be easy to get her on the team, but Wisdom would have to see what he could do. If anything, he had already set plans into motion to ensure that Magneto would no longer be a problem.

That was three. Not enough. Not for what Fury wanted. Wisdom yawned and stretched his arms. As he did, he glanced down and took note of an unfamiliar name. Wisdom set down the glass and pulled the agent's file, reading over the information.

"Ex-Navy SEAL... expert martial artist... telepathic abilities..."

He may not have been the kind of high-level telepath the X-Men were used to, but for black ops work, it seemed Sean Watanabe had all the makings of a great spy. He'd gone against the Mandarin, worked with Ghost Rider and Wolverine. Earned the nickname Brass when he was in the SEALs. He also had a bit of tragedy in his life—the reason he went after the Mandarin was because his lover was killed when the Mandarin attacked the Avengers.

"Four," said Wisdom, putting Watanabe's file in the same stack as Maverick and Mystique. Two more operatives... that's all he needed.

He looked over the list of previous X-Force members. Not only from when the team had become affiliated with SHIELD, but before as well. Following Magneto's acquisition of Genosha, the team had reformed briefly. Siryn was already out, Moonstar and Wolfsbane ran with Force Works so that made them too high profile, Warlock was dead and that left Siphon and Weapon X. Wisdom immediately dismissed Siphon because of her inexperience. He needed people he could trust to do the job right.

Weapon X however, he was an interesting case. Served as an assassin for Donald Pierce, low-level telepath equipped with a body suit that could generate a forcefield which Weapon X used in a variety of fashions. When

last seen, he was with the Mutant Underground. Wisdom supposed he could get the man to come work for him at SHIELD.

But as much as Wisdom hated to admit it, there was one thing this new X-Force lacked. The ease of getting into places that Shadowcat had provided them. With her phasing abilities, no complex was impenetrable. Peter lit a cigarette and searched through the files. There were thousands of psychic mutants, surely there had to be at least one more mutant who could phase.

It wasn't whom he expected, and he was sure Fury would have plenty of objections, but she seemed like the perfect choice for the team. And more importantly, she wasn't Kitty Pryde.

---

The next day found Wisdom once again sitting in Fury's office, complete with Wisdom's picks for his new team. Fury read over the members Wisdom had submitted, but his face was unreadable. Wisdom realized at that moment he would hate to play the Colonel in poker.

"Watanabe and North are in," said Fury.

"What about the others?"

"I've no objections to Weapon X, but you gotta get in touch with him yourself," said Fury. "Darkholme's doin' good work where she's at now, I don't wanna pull her away. She and Forge are our eyes an' ears in Genosha."

"Keep her on file, I've some ideas of my own about Lehnsherr," said Wisdom.

Fury leaned forward. "You better not be talkin' about overthrowing a U.N.-appointed leader of a sovereign nation."

"Perish the thought," said Wisdom with a grin. "What about the other one I've got on that list?"

"Definitely not."

"Any reason?"

"Aside from the whole terrorist part?"

"Says the man who trusts Mystique," said Wisdom. "The girl's had a rough life, Fury. The things she's had to do... If we talk to her, show her that things can be different, I'm sure we could work something out. Allow her to work for us in exchange for a pardon."

"I don't trust her, she's an assassin and terrorist, she's too dangerous," said Fury. "An' worse than Darkholme, she's a believer. A fanatic. We can't

have someone like her on our side."

"We can if we're using her as a weapon against mutual enemies," said Wisdom. "Cold War tactics, Nicky, remember?"

Fury grunted a response. Wisdom was right, he knew it. It was the kind of thing they used to do all the time during the Cold War. The enemy of your enemy is your friend.

"Don't screw this up, Wisdom."

Wisdom smirked as he raised his class. "Happy days are here again, Nicky."

---

Wisdom's next stop was the cabins on the Helicarrier, where he knew he would find Maverick. Following the job in Iraq, all of the Team X operatives save for Siryn had remained onboard the Helicarrier. Wisdom didn't care about any of them, particularly Kitty. He just needed to speak to North.

"Come in," was North's gruff reply once Wisdom knocked on the door. Pete entered to find North lying on his cot reading. He was dressed in a standard SHIELD uniform as opposed to the familiar gold armor Wisdom was so accustomed to.

"David old son, how've you been?" he asked.

"Pete," said Maverick. He closed his book and sat up. "What are you doing here? Thought you were on leave."

"I was, just got back," he said. "I hear the same about you, mate."

"For now," said David. "Haven't decided what my next move is. Whether or not I'll stay on or leave SHIELD."

"C'mon David, we both know this is the life you were meant to lead," said Wisdom. "You, me, Fury... we can't survive out there in the real world. We're not meant to be part of it. We're meant to live in the shadows."

"And if I don't want to be part of that world?" asked David.

"Man can't fight what he really is, you know that," said Wisdom.

"X-Force was a mistake, Wisdom."

"I know, we went about it the wrong way, tripped over ourselves and we lost some good people," said Wisdom. "But that doesn't mean we're going to roll over. Fury wants to restructure the team, but not the way it was. The way it should have been. Mutant spooks, striking from the shadows. We'll take on the dangers to mutantkind in ways the X-Men never could, do the jobs they're too afraid to tackle."

"Old school espionage, huh?" asked North.

"Exactly," said Wisdom.

North leaned down and pulled out a metal box from under his cot. He opened it and inside was the gold mask Wisdom was so used to seeing him with.

---

Wisdom's next stop were the holding cells on the Helicarrier. One of his future operatives was waiting, and he knew this one would take some convincing to do. He approached the holding cell and Wisdom placed his palm on the touchpad. It scanned his hand and then the door opened.

In the center of the room was a container, in which SHIELD had been holding the prisoner. Wisdom lifted it and looked down. "Listen to me very carefully, Sooraya. I know you can hear me and I know you can see through the glass. So watch this."

He lifted a finger, which extended into a long, bright white claw.

"This is what I like to call a hot knife. It's about as hot as the sun and as you know, when exposed to enough heat, sand will turn to glass. So imagine what that would do to you in your sand form, just in case you had any ideas. Now, if you're willing to behave yourself, I'll let you out and we can chat like adults, okay?"

Wisdom opened the container and emptied it, pouring the sand from the container onto the ground. He moved one of his hot knives over the sand and the sand instantly avoided his touch.

"Be a good girl now," he said.

The sand rose into a slender form and slowly the sand transformed into the dark skin of the young woman named Sooraya Qadir, completely naked. Wisdom removed his trench coat and offered it to her. Sooraya studied it carefully before she accepted it and used it to cover her body.

Wisdom lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall. "Now, shall we have that little discussion of ours?"

"About what?" asked Dust. "How your government plans to execute me?"

Wisdom grinned as he dragged on the cigarette. "I work for SHIELD, love. We don't answer to any government, only to the UN. Our interest is keeping the entire world safe."

"UN, US, they're all the same," said Dust.

"And what about your life, Sooraya?" asked Wisdom. "I know all about

your past. Abducted by the Taliban, conditioned to be one of their assassins. Once your mutant powers emerged, they found even more uses for you. Even after their collapse, you found yourself taking more and more assignments, going so far as to make a deal with Sinister and his Dark Riders."

"What's your point?"

"Gets to you after awhile, don't it? All the killing, the bloodshed. Doing it all for a cause you're not even sure you believe in. Yet still doing it anyway, because you think it's the only thing you're good at," said Wisdom. "Stop me when this sounds familiar."

Sooraya looked away from him. "What would you know?"

"Been there, done that," said Wisdom. "I know what it's like, living on the outskirts, performing all the secret assassinations. I massacred entire villages on my government's say-so. All in the name of Queen and Country. And for what?"

Wisdom came up behind her, his lips right by her ear. "Not a bloody thing."

"Yet you work for SHIELD?" asked Dust.

"Sure I do," said Wisdom. He circled back to one of the walls and sat down, leaning back against it. "Because I know that while SHIELD may have its problems, I'm not a nine-to-five bloke. And I'm done working for governments that don't represent my interests. With SHIELD, I answer only to Fury, a man who I know I can trust. And with him backing me, I've got the authority to protect the people I should be protecting—mutants."

Sooraya sat across from Wisdom, leaning against the opposite wall and watching him with curiosity.

"You think what happened to you was isolated, love? I've news for you, it wasn't. Governments all over the world are doing the same thing to their own. Kidnapping mutant children from their families, forcing them into reeducation programs, turning them into weapons of the state. There are even reports of scientists using gene therapy to increase the chances that a child's x-gene will manifest. The science behind it is crude and as such, other mutations are occurring. Children whose only mutant power is looking like something out of a Lovecraft book. And they're being slaughtered when they prove useless.

"It's a dark world out there, Sooraya. We're talking about a whole new kind of arms race. It's not about nuclear arms anymore. No, the future is all about persons of mass destruction. There's only one thing standing between these kids and the bastards controlling them—us."

"What do you mean by us?" asked Dust.

Wisdom smiled. "I want you on my team, love. So what do you say, are you in or out?"

---

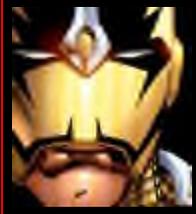


**Pete  
Wisdom**

---

**Westchester County  
New York**

Pete Wisdom had sat in this particular establishment for only ten minutes and already he hated it and, by extension, all of Salem Center. Harry's Hideaway had been a frequent watering hole for the inhabitants of the Xavier Institute and that fact had Wisdom absolutely boggled.



**Maverick**

The scotch was shit and their beer selection read like a who's who of near-frozen gnat's piss. He was actually somewhat impressed they had any scotch at all. The bartender—who looked about twelve—seemed extremely confused when Wisdom ordered the drink on the rocks. Part of Wisdom wanted to request the drink mixed with vermouth—not because he liked his scotch that way, just because he was curious if the little snott-nosed co-ed even knew what vermouth was.



**Brass**

He checked his watch. Ten past. "You'd think a bloke who can teleport anywhere in the blink of an eye could keep to a schedule..." he muttered. Prepared to light a cigarette, he heard the bartender perk up.

"Excuse me, sir—you can't smoke in here."

"Beg pardon?" asked Wisdom. "Last I checked, this is a bar, isn't it?"



**Weapon X**

"Yes..."

"And since when can I not smoke in a bar?"

"This is a restaurant, too," said the bartender. "So by law, we can't allow you to smoke in here."



**Dust**

"An' here I thought you yanks were all about liberty and shit..." said Wisdom. He replaced the cigarette in the pack and stuffed it into the inside pocket of his jacket. "Bugger..."

"I see our time apart hasn't improved your demeanor, Wisdom."



**Nick Fury**

Pete turned his eyes upwards and saw a young man resembling Errol Flynn sit across from him. "Nice disguise, Wagner. Not obvious in the least."

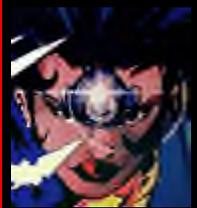
Kurt Wagner shrugged. "So I like to have fun with my image inducer."

Wisdom rolled his eyes as he sipped the scotch. "I'd offer to buy you a drink, but this place charges far too much for shitty alcohol."

"Plus I'm a priest," said Kurt.



**Nightcrawler**



**Fixx**

"Doesn't mean shit," said Wisdom. "You should see some of the Irish priests I knew. Half of them were off their tits during their sermons. One of them hid vodka in bottles of holy water. The parents of a certain baptized boy weren't too happy about that."

"Is there a reason you wanted to see me, Peter?" asked Kurt.

"Couldn't we have met somewhere a tad nicer?" asked Wisdom.

"You're the one who refused to meet at the Institute..."

"Whatever. Now listen, I need your help locating an outfit you lot are associated with."

"What outfit would that be?" asked Kurt. "Not sure if you've noticed, but there aren't many organizations running around with an X these days."

"This one doesn't have an X and they're quite difficult to get a hold of," said Wisdom. "The Mutant Underground Support Engine."

Kurt looked down and cleared his throat. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh yes you do," said Wisdom. "I've important business with one of their members. Problem is, not even SHIELD can narrow down their location."

"How did you find out about MUSE?"

"Don't insult me, Wagner," said Wisdom. "I've been in espionage for longer than I'd care to admit. MI-6, WHO, Black Air, SHIELD—all of them have files on a mutant underground. And one of the members is very important to me."

"Which one?"

"Pardon?"

"Who do you need?" asked Kurt.

"Don't know his real name, but he goes by the handle of Weapon X."

Kurt snickered and shook his head. "I should have guessed."

"You gonna help me?" asked Wisdom.

"Why me? Why not go through Kitty?"

Wisdom flinched at the mention of that name. "We're not exactly on speaking terms. And there's no one else in the X-Men I can trust. Which means it falls to you, mate. So once again, will you help me?"

Kurt stood from the table. "Go back to your hotel, Peter. I'm sure you'll get a fix on the man you're looking for."

---

**Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents**



**DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH  
Part One**

By [Dino Pollard](#)

---

***Thaton  
Union of Myanmar***

Officially called the Union of Myanmar and one of the largest countries in Southeast Asia, Burma is a country rife with tension. Maung Sein lived his entire life in the Mon state in the southern part, the son of rice farmers. Sein, however, found work elsewhere—in a large, tire factory located in the town of Thaton.

At twenty years of age, Sein knew his opportunities were limited. Perhaps if he could find a way to one of the bordering nations, Thailand or China maybe, he would have a better chance at a decent life. But getting past the Myanmar military would prove difficult.

Especially when one day, they turned up in Sein's factory, armed with weapons. The factory floor manager stood at the fore, and he pointed the squad's leader to Sein's location. Maung began to panic. He felt the sweat on his brow grow at the approach.

The commander stepped right up to him and said, "Maung Sein?"

Sein wanted to shake his head, but he knew it would mean nothing. So he nodded his head slowly and the commander nodded. "By order of the State Peace and Development Council, you are to come with us to Naypyidaw immediately."

"Am... am I being charged?" asked Sein.

"You dare question me, genetrash?" asked the commander. He raised his arm and backhanded Sein across his jaw. When his hand connected, however, it shattered with a crack.

"AGH!" the commander cried, looking in shock at his broken hand. The soldiers raised their rifles in response, pointing them at Sein. His fellow workers looked on with horror at this man they thought they knew.

Sein's hand went to his face and he felt its hardness. Were he able to see his own face, he would see that it now took on the appearance of a diamond.

"Shoot him!" shouted the commander.

"No, no please!" said Sein. "I didn't mean to—!"

The soldiers heard no more, choosing instead to open fire on him. The workers ran from the vicinity as the bullets slammed into Sein's diamond-hard body at point-blank range. His body rocked with each strike, and it kept doing so until each soldier emptied his magazine. Once the smoke cleared, Sein fell backward, striking the factory floor.

The commander gestured to Sein. "Check him." One of the soldiers did so, examining the worker's fallen form. Sein's body returned to its normal state of flesh and blood. The soldier looked up at the commander.

"He's alive..." he said. "And... he doesn't have a scratch on him."

"Bring him," said the commander. "We are to continue with our orders."

---

### ***White Plains New York***

When Pete Wisdom entered his room at the Crowne Plaza, he wasn't surprised when he saw a young woman sitting in the chair. She had long, black hair and some sort of strange device on her forehead. With an M tattooed over her right eye and dressed in a blue and gold uniform that proudly displayed a prominent X badge, she was definitely far from inconspicuous.

"I see the Mutant Underground isn't as subtle as I've been led to believe," said Wisdom.

"People only see what I want them to see," said the young woman. From the small device on her forehead, two small, glowing butterfly-like shapes emerged and flittered around her head. "Thanks to my little friends, of course."

"Of course," said Wisdom, plopping down on his bed. "Wouldn't be one of Xavier's outfits without a psi onboard, now would it?"

"I got your message," she said. "My name's Fixx."

Wisdom chuckled slightly, remembering Kurt's words before they parted ways. "Wagner, you cheeky bastard..."

"I'm sorry?" asked Fixx.

"Just something Nightcrawler said to me," he said. "Made it pretty clear you were the one I should talk to." He produced a pack of Silk Cuts and offered it to her. "Smoke?"

"I thought all the rooms in the Crowne Plaza are non-smoking," said Fixx.

"They are," said Wisdom, placing one of the cigarettes in his mouth. "I suppose it's why Fury booked me a room here. Must be his idea of a joke."

Fixx crossed her legs. "Shall we cut to the chase, Mr. Wisdom? Nightcrawler said you were interested in establishing contact with the Underground, but I'm not sure why you went through him when you already have some of my former teammates working at SHIELD."

"I don't know Bishop or Shard well enough to trust them," said Wisdom. "Wagner and I may not be bosom buddies, but he's good people."

"So what did you want to talk about?" asked Fixx, one of her psychic faeries flittering above her outstretched palm. "Or should I just find out for myself?"

"Don't bother, I'm not too fond of having people root through my mind. Besides, you might not like what you see." Wisdom lit the cigarette with the tip of his finger providing the necessary heat. "I'm interested in one of your members, someone who's really good at the stealth game. Young man by the name of Weapon X."

Fixx nodded. "Nightcrawler mentioned you were interested in Brandon. But he's doing good work where he is now."

"How many operatives does MUSE have?"

"I'm not at liberty to sa—"

"Right, of course you aren't," said Wisdom. "What I mean is, you have plenty of people and you mostly help mutants find safe passage, setting them up with new identities, that sort of thing. You're good at finding the victims, but not so good at striking the aggressors."

"Now wait just a minu—"

Wisdom raised his hands in a gesture of goodwill. "No disrespect meant, love. It's a difficult job, fighting mutant oppression, and no outfit is equipped to do all the work themselves. What I propose is we work together."

Fixx relaxed her composure. "I'm listening."

"SHIELD is interested in bringing Weapon X onboard, having him help us take out some of the nasties who are doing harm to mutants," said Wisdom. "We have intel that points to mutant rights violators in all parts of the less-developed world. Africa, Southeast Asia, Central and South America... We can't all be everywhere at once and SHIELD can't protect all of them. Their organization is too big and too concerned with protecting the free world. So these victims slip through the cracks. That's where you come in. We'll handle the heavy lifting, take out the guilty parties, and you pick up the refugees and do your thing."

"And you need Brandon for this?" asked Fixx.

Wisdom cracked a smile. "Let's face facts. He's more Marine Corps than Peace Corps, isn't he? What do you say?"

"I say you ask him," said Fixx. A figure moved from behind the curtain, dressed in a black bodysuit complete with goggles equipped with red lenses. Wisdom recognized the man instantly from his file photo.

"Has he been there the whole time?" asked Wisdom.

"Yup," said Fixx. "Used his telepathy to help mask his presence."

"Not bad at all," said Wisdom. "Weapon X, I presume. I take it I don't have to repeat myself, so what do you say? In or out, mate?"

The masked assassin simply nodded.

---

A hundred miles southwest of Block Island, nestled in the Atlantic Ocean, exists a marvel of modern-day technology. Developed by SHIELD with the aid of Stark Enterprises lies the Triskelion, a man-made island that operates solely as a SHIELD facility.

With the aid of SHIELD's HERMES transport system, agents stationed at the base are able to teleport instantly from the Helicarrier to the Triskelion. A few of the agents were recently transferred to the Triskelion under special orders directly from Colonel Nick Fury, orders which hold no official record.

"Who else has Pete recruited?" asked David North. Under the codename of Maverick, North has served with SHIELD for some time now, always with the X-Force program, and always under the leadership of Pete Wisdom.

"Mystique is on reserve. Beyond her there's Sean Watanabe, calls himself Brass," said Fury.

"Never heard of him," said Maverick.

"Not surprising, he hasn't spent much time in the spotlight," said Fury. "An expert in combat, both armed and unarmed. Also a telepath."

"And the others?"

"Wisdom went off to New York to recruit the last member of the team, someone from the X-camp."

"That's it? Just four active members?" asked Maverick. "X-Force usually had a bit more than that."

"There's one more," said Fury. "Dust."

Maverick's expression was hidden behind his trademark mask, but if it were off, Fury would see disgust on his face. "One of the Dark Riders? Brilliant work, Nick. How did he get you to sign off on that one?"

"It's a dark world, and the jobs you guys are takin' on are gonna call for some flexible morality. Dust has that, plus Wisdom makes a good sales pitch," said Fury.

The door opened. Brass stood in the open passage, with Dust by his side. Fury gestured to them as he spoke to Maverick. "Meet your teammates. David North, Sean Watanabe."

Brass extended his hand and Maverick took it. "I've reviewed your file. Pretty impressive career you've had," said Brass.

"The most impressive stuff isn't a matter of record," said Maverick. "Wish I could say I'm familiar with your exploits."

"Hopefully I'll live up to your expectations," said Brass.

"And you already know Sooraya Qadir," said Fury.

Maverick made no motion to shake her hand or greet her with any sort of welcome. He just crossed his arms over his chest. "Yes, we've met."

"Where's Wisdom?" asked Dust. "I didn't sign on to stand around waiting."

"Actually you did," said Fury. "Espionage 101, kid. Most of this game is establishing contacts, investigating sources, and acting when necessary."

"Sounds like a reporter," said Dust.

"Except no book deals when you stumble on something big," said Brass. "Way I understand it, nothing we do will ever be known to the public."

"Especially not if I have my way," said Fury.

The door opened. Wisdom entered with Weapon X by his side. "I see everyone's here."

"Everyone except Mystique," said Maverick.

"Just as I expected," said Wisdom. "Guess it's time to call role, eh? I've recruited you all for one, simple purpose—to help mutants. And I don't mean running around in tights like the X-Men, putting out fires. No, we do the dirty work they can't—or won't—do. I won't kid any of you, if you've got a very good moral compass, I don't have use for you. The things we'll do... they won't be pretty. Everyone still onboard?"

No one spoke up to dissent. Wisdom took that as a cue that everyone was in agreement.

"Good," he continued. "More and more mutants are being born every day. And there are a lot of very bad people who want to exploit those mutants. We have to make sure that doesn't happen. We works in the shadows, answer only to Fury. No one knows we exist. I chose you all because each of you has skills useful in the world of espionage:

"Maverick and I go back, we've been with this outfit since the beginning. He's been doing this since the Cold War, so he's got plenty of experience.

"Weapon X has been conditioned for years to be the perfect assassin. Telepathy and a bodysuit which projects a forcefield he can manipulate in a variety of ways.

"Brass, also a telepath, is a weapons master and he's proven in the past that his name comes from the massive stones between his legs. Not a lot of people would throw themselves into situations he has.

"And finally, that brings us to Dust. Former terrorist, forced into that life by the Taliban."

"Why do we have a former terrorist on here again?" asked Brass.

"Because terrorism is in the eye of the beholder," said Wisdom. "Our actions will be viewed as terrorism. But beyond that, Dust is out for one thing—the preservation of her people. And her ability to transform into

sand means she can get into places the rest of us can't." He turned to Fury. "Anything to add?"

"Just the usual non-disclosure crap," said Fury. "In case you haven't realized it by now, SHIELD can't be afford to be linked with you people. So if you're captured, we will not come after you. If you claim SHIELD status, we will deny it. There are no files on any of you. None of you are officially working with SHIELD, understand?"

Again, no one opened their mouth to protest.

"Good," said Fury. He held up a manila folder in his hand. "In that case, let's get started."

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**



**Maverick**



**Brass**



**Weapon X**



**Dust**

---

**Port Victoria  
Republic of Seychelles**

Prudence Leighton knew she was being followed.

Armed with the mutant ability to possess the minds of others made her very psychically aware. Although she couldn't read minds, she could definitely detect them in her vicinity. And now, she knew there was one in her presence, an imprint that she seemed unable to shake as she walked along the sand of Port Victoria.

She removed her sunglasses and looked around. "I'm not in the mood for games, so you may as well come out. Because if you don't, I'll just take over your body myself."

The sand rose up and began to swirl around Prudence, its speed increasing. Prudence could sense the young woman's psyche within the grains of sand, but she stood silently and unfazed by the display of power as the sand quickly coalesced into the form of a slight woman wearing an abaya with a niqab covering her head.

"Prudence Leighton," said the covered girl. Prudence could detect the accent in her voice, somewhere from the Persian region of the world.

"Who are you?" asked Prudence.

"A friend of a friend," said the woman.

"Our mutual friend doesn't have a name for you?"

The woman remained silent. Prudence scoffed. "Of course not. What's this about?"

"Our mutual friend has a need to speak with you."

"And where is this friend of ours?" asked Prudence.

The woman pointed off into the distance. Prudence looked behind her to see her own house on the beach. She shook her head. "Right, naturally. Whoever it is apparently doesn't want to be seen in public with me, huh?"

The woman nodded and the wind seemed to blow her away, her body converting into sand and seemingly scattering into the sky. Prudence continued the trek to her home and walked up the steps to her balcony. She slid open the sliding glass door and saw a man sitting in the chair sipping a clear liquid from a glass. On the table next to him was a half-empty bottle of Ketel One and a pack of Silk Cut cigarettes.

"Jesus Christ, Wisdom!" she said, storming past him and grabbing the bottle as she did. "I just bought this bottle *yesterday!* Do you have any idea how much this stuff costs?"

Pete Wisdom simply smiled as he sipped the drink. "Relax love, I'll send you a new one later."

"You drank half the bottle and you don't seem the least bit drunk," she said.

"That's because for once, I'm not drinking alone," said Wisdom. Two other men entered the room, both holding glasses. One was European with short, brown hair and the other Japanese.

"And who are these guys?" she asked.

"I'd like you to meet Dave North and Sean Watanabe," said Wisdom. "Boys, meet Pru Leighton. Best piece of ass this side of the equator."

"Always with the charm," said Prudence, rolling her eyes. "What do you want here, Wisdom? I'm not in the mood for your crap today. And next time you want to talk to me, come see me yourself. Don't send whatever piece of jailbait you're banging this week to come find me."

"Not like that at all, love," said Wisdom. "Sooraya, like Dave and Sean over here, are friends, that's all."

"S.H.I.E.L.D. business again?" asked Prudence.

"We're not S.H.I.E.L.D.," said North.

"Of course you're not," said Prudence. She glanced at Watanabe. "And you, stop trying to read my mind."

"*How did she know?*" asked Watanabe through a psychic link.

"*She's a jumper, lad,*" said Wisdom. "*She can possess anyone in her immediate vicinity. Which means she's more psi-sensitive than most.*"

"*Would've helped if you told me that in advance, Wisdom.*"

Prudence poured herself a drink and sat on the couch. "We might as well get on with it. Why are you here?"

"We're investigating reports of mutant rights violations in the world and something that's turned up is a bit of nastiness in south Asia," said Wisdom.

"There's *always* been nastiness in south Asia," said Prudence.

"We're talking *mutants*, love—that's our concern," said Wisdom. "Now, are you gonna help us out or not?"

"Much as I possibly can, I suppose," said Prudence. "A few months ago, there was a report from Amnesty International saying that there were rumors of mutants being sought out in Burma."

"For what purpose?" asked North.

Prudence shrugged. "Not much else has been ascertained yet. But the Burmese are doing something with mutants, whether it's imprisonment or execution is unknown at this point."

"Whatever it is, we can bet it doesn't bode well for mutants," said North.

"What other information do you have on Burma?" asked Sean.

"Not much, only some unverified reports that Burma just spent quite a bit of money on the black market."

"Pack your bags, chaps—we're going to Burma," said Wisdom.

---

**Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents**



**DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH  
Part Two**

By [Dino Pollard](#)

---

***Siberia***

During the time of the Soviet Union, northern Siberia became notorious for housing numerous state-run penal labor camps. In Russian, they were known as Glavnoye Upravleniye Ispravitel'no-Trudovyykh Lagerey or Gulag for short. From 1930 until 1953, an estimated 1.76 million people died in the Gulags.

Although the camps were officially dissolved by 1960, many of them still stand to this day, one in particular. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia fell into harsh times and many of those once in the employ of the Soviet Union turned to the black market instead.

A man in a wheelchair moved throughout one of the fortified camps flanked by guards on all sides of him. His skin was green, taking on a reptilian appearance. And in his long life, he had seen enough death and decay and destruction to drive even the most hardened souls completely insane.

"Now now, let's see what we have here," he said, wheeling up to several monitors showcased before him. Each of them displayed the vitals of numerous people hooked up to machines. He pointed to two of the monitors. "Prep these ones for surgery." His fingers gestured to another three. "These ones are ready for shipment. And we need to work on cultivating the DNA of the others before the new arrivals get here."

---

### ***Naypyidaw Union of Myanmar***

Maung Sein awoke and found himself attached to some sort of odd chair, one which had everything save for his chest and head completely covered. He could feel a draft on his skin and had no idea why.

The room was dark and cold and Maung Sein couldn't make out much of anything. The silence was almost deafening for him. He could feel the sweat bead on his forehead as his heart rate quickly increased.

He heard the sound of locks moving and then the heavy door opened. A few uniformed guards along with a man who appeared to be a high-ranking officer stepped in.

"Maung Sein, my name is General Tun Aung" said the officer. "Welcome to Naypyidaw."

"Wh-what am I doing here?" asked Maung Sein. "I've done nothing wrong, I swear!"

"Do you know what the x-gene is, Maung Sein?" asked Tun Aung.

"No."

"The x-gene is a genetic anomaly found in a certain segment of the population," said Tun Aung. "A person with this gene possesses strange abilities—marks them as mutants."

"B-but I'm not a mutant, I can't be, I—!"

"Relax, my friend, relax," said Tun Aung, gently laying a hand on Maung Sein's forehead, trying to calm him. "The State Peace and Development Council views this as a positive trait in you. In fact, you are quite special and now, you have a chance to serve your country. Doesn't that sound nice?"

Maung Sein looked confused.

"How?" he asked.

"Your particular ability has proven most interesting," said Tun Aung. "You have the ability to convert your body into diamond. And even more astounding is this diamond form can regenerate itself."

"I don't understand..."

"Of course you don't. What this means is that while in this diamond form, if you suffer any damage to your body, your body will repair it. And this is beneficial for the SPDC because Myanmar is not a wealthy nation. The precious gems we can cultivate from your body will prove to be an excellent source of funding and can bring prosperity to many citizens, including your own family."

"That's... that's all you want from me?" asked Maung Sein. "So I let you take some of these diamonds and then I can return home?"

Tun Aung laughed. "Oh my, of course not. You see, we plan to continue to cultivate diamonds from your body."

Maung Sein's eyes widened.

"Why look a gift horse in the mouth?" asked Tun Aung with a smile. "That chair you're in, it will cleave and collect diamonds from your body. Unfortunately, your ability only seems to work while you are conscious, therefore you will feel the entire process."

Maung Sein's body began to quiver and he tried to hold back the sobs the fear inside him began to generate.

"On behalf of the SPDC, I thank you for your service to our great nation," said Tun Aung.

---

## **Yangon**

Formerly the capital of Myanmar during the days it was called Burma, Yangon itself has gone through a name change, once known as Rangoon. Once the cleanest city in Asia, it has dwindled by a massive amount since the various coup d'états over the years.

Despite being ruled by a military junta and various sanctions imposed by the United States and European Union, tourism still exists in Myanmar and can actually be quite profitable.

In a hotel room, the X-Force team opened their luggage. They chartered a private plane and paid off security officials to avoid any detection of the equipment they planned to use. With the economy in shambles, it made bribes very attractive.

The suitcases didn't contain clothing or personal items but rather laptops and other electronic equipment as well as power packs given the unreliability of Myanmar's electricity.

"Get this lot set up quickly," said Wisdom. "I want an uplink to S.H.I.E.L.D. satellites ten minutes ago."

Dust and Weapon X, unfamiliar with the equipment, simply stood to the side or assisted when they were asked. Brass, Maverick and Wisdom hooked up the laptops to their power sources and linked up with SHIELD's satellites, thereby bypassing any security restrictions Myanmar imposed on Internet access.

"We set up?" asked Wisdom.

"Satellite feed is working nicely," said Brass.

"All three laptops are synchronized," said Maverick.

"Beautiful, now for phase two," said Wisdom. He removed two round objects from a metal case attached to wires and gave one to Weapon X and one to Brass. "Put these on your head."

"What for?" asked Brass.

"Because I thought you'd look pretty with a tiara," said Wisdom. "Just do it."

Brass shrugged and slipped the halo over his head and it came to rest on his brow. Weapon X did the same. Wisdom hooked the two headsets into the laptop's USB ports and opened up a program labeled CEREBRITE.

"What are you doing, Wisdom?" asked Brass.

"Ever hear of Cerebro, that device the X-Men use to find mutants?" asked Wisdom. Brass nodded. "Well, this is Cerebrite, think of it as Cerebro's younger cousin. Doesn't have anywhere near the range that Cerebro does, but it should be enough to cover at least half the country. With the two of you using your telepathy in tandem, that range can probably expand to the entire country. If we're lucky."

"What's the point of doing this?" asked Dust.

"The point, my dear, is that if we find a localized area of mutants, then we can assume we're looking at a prison," said Wisdom.

"Or a mutant underground community," said Maverick.

"Either way, it's something we need to check out," said Wisdom. A digital map came up and Wisdom pointed to a spot with a few bright green dots. "Right here, that's us. Now start expanding outwards."

The LED lights flashed as Weapon X and Brass expanded their telepathy, reaching out and scanning the brainwaves of those around them. Cerebrite boosted those abilities and separated the mutant brainwaves from human ones, cataloging and displaying them on Wisdom's laptop.

"Okay, so far we're pretty standard," said Wisdom. "Nothing out of the ordinary."

As the map began to expand outward, more and more dots popped up, some of them in transit and most of them gathering around the central area. Dozens of dots began to spring up in a centralized location.

"Jackpot," said Wisdom with a grin. "We've fo—"

"ARGGHHH!!!!"

The scream came from Brass, who pulled the halo from his head and tossed it away. Weapon X reacted similarly, but made no sound. Maverick and Wisdom went to their teammates' sides, while Dust simply stood back and watched with curiosity.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Some... some sort of feedback," said Brass. "There's someone trying to block our search."

"Who could do that?" asked Maverick.

"A powerful psychic could do it," said Brass. Blood leaked a little from his nose and he wiped it away.

"Or someone with the proper technology," said Maverick. He looked at Wisdom. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Pru said there were reports of Burma buying some stuff off the black market," said Wisdom.

"But we're talking about *Cerebro* technology, Pete," said Maverick.

"Right, so..." Wisdom paused. "Bloody hell... Cassidy, you prick..."

"Who?" asked Brass.

"Sean Cassidy, used to run with the X-Men, now he's working for an outfit called the Byron Agency," said Wisdom. "If anyone had the means and reason to sell X-Men technology, it's him."

"Were you able to pinpoint the location of those mutants?" asked Brass.

Wisdom looked at the laptop and a big message that read SIGNAL LOST flashed. He shook his head. "No such luck. We'll figure out another way in there."

"What do you propose?" asked Maverick.

Wisdom smiled at his friend. "How do you feel about staging a demonstration of your powers?"

---

Maverick walked the streets of Yangon without the benefit of his gear. He felt naked without his mask on his face and his gun by his side. This idea of Wisdom's was crazy, but North had learned in his time with the Englishman that those crazy ideas tended to produce results.

It's why Fury kept Wisdom onboard with SHIELD even in light of all their problems and it's the sole reason Maverick remained with X-Force after everything that happened.

He entered a bar in Yangon and slid up by the bartender.

"Welcome," said the bartender. "What do you want?"

"Beer is fine," said North. The bartender set down a bottle of beer that had MYANMAR on the label. Maverick took a sip from it and noticed the taste was pretty good.

*++Don't get too comfortable, Mav. We need to get moving.++*

The voice that came through Maverick's earpiece belonged to Wisdom, communicating to him from the hotel. Maverick drained the beer quickly and looked around the bar, picking out the biggest guy. He slid off the stool and walked over to the man, shoving him.

"What are you doing?" asked the man.

"Think I didn't see you looking at me funny?" asked Maverick.

"I wasn't looking at you," said the man.

"Fuck you, gook!" said Maverick. He took a swing at the guy and purposely missed. The man responded in kind, knocking Maverick off his feet. He rolled with the punch, allowing his body to absorb the kinetic energy. He unleashed a low-level blast, not powerful enough to really hurt the guy, but enough to send him out of the bar and into the street.

Soldiers who patrolled the streets of Yangon witnessed Maverick firing energy blasts and ran towards him, drawing their guns.

*++Showtime, mate.++*

Maverick leapt into the air, firing off a succession of blasts taking out the soldiers' rifles. He landed in the midst of them and relied on handheld fighting techniques to disable them quickly.

*++Ease up, Mav. Remember, you **want** to get captured.++*

Maverick leapt back, removing the earpiece as he did and discarding it. When he was captured, he couldn't risk them locating it on him during a search. The soldiers came at him again and others joined in, pointing their guns at him. Maverick stopped and raised his arms in surrender. One of the soldiers slammed the butt of his rifle against Maverick's head and he fell unconscious on the ground.

"Contact Naypyidaw, tell them we've found one."

---

The camera went dark once Maverick was knocked unconscious, meaning the ocular implant stopped functioning. Wisdom sat back in the hotel and took a drag on his cigarette.

"Sure about this, Wisdom?" asked Brass.

"Davey can handle himself," said Wisdom. "The man's been doing this since before you were born, Brass."

"What about Dust?"

"She's got her part to play and I'm sure she'll do just fine," said Wisdom. He looked at Weapon X. "How you feelin', mate?"

Weapon X just stood silently.

"Not a big talker, is he?" asked Brass.

"Nope, but he's good at what he does." Wisdom looked at the laptop. He had all three of them trying to locate additional information through S.H.I.E.L.D.'s files on Myanmar's history with mutants. So far, the search turned up nothing, only unverified reports.

"What happens now?" asked Brass.

"Now, we wait," said Wisdom. "Welcome to the wonderful world of covert intelligence, my friend. Ninety percent of the game is patience. It's not like the X-Men or the Avengers—we don't just wait for trouble to show up at our doorstep. Most of the time, we have to go out and find it and it can be a long road."

The wall exploded towards them and the three mutants saw a group of soldiers armed with automatic rifles as well as a few wearing exoskeletons that resembled Sentinel technology.

"You were saying?" asked Brass.

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**



**Maverick**



**Brass**



**Weapon X**



**Dust**

---

***Naypyidaw***  
***The Union of Myanmar***

Nerves flamed as the naked form of David North slammed against the hard stone of his prison cell. His jailers shut the door behind him, locking him inside the small room that was not much larger than a few feet all around. The only toilet he had was a bucket in the corner of the room. No bed.

The man called Maverick approached the cell door, examining it for possible weaknesses. His hand went to his neck. They had stripped him of all his clothes and in place, put on a small collar with glowing lights.

A power inhibitor.

Myanmar had gotten their hands on some pretty impressive technology, it seemed. Enough that they could bypass Wisdom's Cerebrite scans. But Maverick's imprisonment was all part of the plan. He was nothing more than the bait that allowed them access to the prison.

Maverick opened his mouth and began to retch. He stuck a finger down his throat to help the process. It took a few moments, but before long, he began to vomit the contents of his stomach onto the cold, hard floor. Mixed in with the stomach acids and partly-digested food were grains of sand. Soon, the sand piled up and once it was all expelled from his body, the sand rose and formed into the figure of a young woman wearing an abaya with a niqab over her head.

“Looks like we made it in one piece,” said Maverick.

“Not my preferred mode of travel,” said Dust.

“Lighten up, at least you didn't have to deal with beatings as they strip-searched you. Get your job done so we can get the hell out of here, okay?”

Dust nodded and her body dissolved into sand once more, seeping underneath the small gap in the door. Once she departed, Maverick sat in the corner of the cell and rested his head against the stone. During his long career, he had been trapped in similar places to this, and now he could use the opportunity to catch some rest.

---

**Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents**



## DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH Part Three

By [Dino Pollard](#)

---

### **Yangon**

Pete Wisdom had just gotten through telling his new teammate, Sean Watanabe, that covert intelligence is ninety percent patience and it's rare that trouble shows up at their doorstep.

Then the wall of their hotel burst apart. Standing amidst the newly-made hole were Myanmar soldiers armed with automatic weapons. A few of them wore exoskeletons, exoskeletons which resembled Sentinel technology.

“You were saying?” asked Brass.

“Just my bloody luck...” muttered Wisdom. He pointed a finger at the laptop computer equipped with the Cerebrite tracking program. That program linked Wisdom's laptop via satellite to Cerebro mutant-tracking technology. And with a thought, Wisdom's finger grew long, pointed, and extremely hot. The point shot off from the tip, striking the computer and rendering it completely useless.

“What are you doing?” asked Brass.

“Last thing I need is these bastards getting their hands on our tech,” said Wisdom. He immediately dropped to the ground, barely dodging gunfire from one of the soldiers. Wisdom rolled under the bed for some protection. One of the soldiers knelt down to find him and the moment he did, Wisdom fired off a hot knife directly into the soldier's forehead.

Brass leaped forward, his hands reaching behind his back and drawing a pair of handguns. He brought them around and opened fire as he fell through the air, cutting down three soldiers in his wake by the time he landed. One of the exoskeleton wearers swung a massive, metallic fist towards him. Brass jumped at just the right moment, the fist leaving the floor damaged. He brought his guns up and opened fire again, but they

just ricocheted off the metal hide.

Weapon X jumped into the fray, latching onto the Sentinel's back. His forcefield flickered around his body and he lifted his fist. The forcefield around his hand extended and narrowed into a point and he drove it into the Sentinel. Sparks flew from the gash inflicted by the assassin.

He flipped off the Sentinel, swinging his arm around and the energy blade from his forcefield following in a trail. The blade sliced off the head of another soldier, his body slumping to the ground. Brass looked on in shock at this display of brutality, but before he could say anything, his telepathy picked up on another soldier coming up behind him. Brass dropped to the ground, preventing the soldier from driving the butt of his rifle against the former Navy SEAL's skull. Brass put his weight on his hands and thrust his legs upward, striking the soldier in the jaw.

Wisdom rolled from under the bed and stretched out his fingers, eyeing the four soldiers in front of him. His hot knives extended from the tips of his fingers, each of them striking one of the four soldiers in their chest.

The last remaining soldier also wore an exoskeleton. Wisdom, Brass and Weapon X stepped before him, and Weapon X looked to his leader.

“What've we got here, lads?” asked Wisdom.

*“It's not a Sentinel, it's an exoskeleton. There's a human inside there,”* said Brass through his psychic link with Wisdom and Weapon X.

Weapon X jumped towards the exoskeleton, holding the palms of his hand together and raising his arm over his head. He brought his arms forward, the forcefield extending in a slim extension. It pierced the exoskeleton, tearing through the metal. Weapon X pulled his hands apart, splitting the skeleton in two and inside the small cockpit sat a soldier strapped in, watching with shock and horror.

The assassin pulled the soldier free and dropped him on the hardwood floor. Wisdom knelt down by the frightened survivor. Wisdom grabbed the soldier by his chin and turned the soldier's eyes towards him.

“I think we should have a little chat.”

---

### ***Naypyidaw***

Maung Sein slowly opened his eyes. He had eventually passed out from the pain of his body being carved by the contraption Tun Aung left him in. Now, the second he awoke, he felt his body harden and convert back into diamond. And almost instantly, he felt the saws. Diamond-cutting blades that cleaved into his body, collecting the jewels as they fell.

He wanted to scream, but no sound came from his mouth. He only hoped his death would come soon, so he could be spared this endless torment.

Maung Sein was so occupied that he failed to notice the grains of sand fill inside the cell from beneath the cracks in the door. The pool of sand rose and materialized into the form of Dust. Once she laid eyes on the former factory worker, she gasped in horror.

"What have they done to you?" she asked.

Maung Sein looked up at her. She spoke English and he couldn't understand a word she said. But she seemed concerned about him.

Dust walked over to the machine and tried to fool around with the knobs and switches. After a few tries, the machine powered down and Maung Sein felt a brief respite from his torture. She opened up the contraption and he fell out of it like a rock, landing on the stone ground. Dust knelt by him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Can you walk?" she asked.

He looked at her quizzically.

"Suppose you don't speak English," she said. She tugged on his arm and pointed towards the door, signaling that she was going to get him out of here.

Before she could revert to her sand form and free him from the cell, the door swung open. Tun Aung stood there with a smile on his face. Flanking him on each side were soldiers wearing Sentinel exoskeletons.

"Maung Sein, I see you have a visitor," he said. He looked to Dust and began to speak in English. "I am General Tun Aung, this is my prison. And you are...?"

Dust remained silent.

"Of course, I expected as much," said Tun Aung. "And which faction are you with?"

Again, Dust offered no words.

"Very well, have it your way," he said. He then spoke to the Sentinels in Burmese: "kill her."

---

### **Yangon**

"Sentinel technology," said Brass. "How did they get Sentinel technology?"

"That's what we're about to find out," said Wisdom. He placed his hand on the shoulder of the soldier they had tied to a chair. "You ready to start talking?"

"Wisdom, he probably doesn't speak any English," said Brass.

"We've ways around that," said Wisdom. He reached into his pocket and retrieved a small case. He opened it and plugged the device into his ear.

"What's that?" asked Brass.

"Alien technology, universal translator. Courtesy of our friends at the Institute, whether they know it or not," said Wisdom. "You boys go take a walk, I'll speak with our friend."

"We could just as easily extract the information from his mind," said Brass.

"Remember the feedback wave from when you used Cerebrite?" asked Wisdom. "We can't take any chances. Now go."

Weapon X followed his orders willingly. Brass hesitated for a moment, taking a second glance at X-Force's leader, before leaving as well. Once they were gone, Wisdom pulled out a chair and set it in front of his captive. He drew a pack of Silk Cuts from his pocket and placed one of the cigarettes between his lips. He held the pack out to the soldier, who slowly nodded. Wisdom slid one of the cigarettes into the soldier's mouth. The mutant raised his finger and the tip started to come to a point and glow brightly and he used it to light both the cigarettes.

"What can you tell me about the SPDC's Sentinel technology?" asked Wisdom as he removed the cigarette from his mouth, leaving a cloud of smoke in its wake. His Burmese was absolutely flawless thanks to the translator.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the captive.

"You don't, huh? What did you think that fancy suit you were wearing was? A Hummer?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the captive repeated.

"Right, of course not," said Wisdom. He took a slow drag on the cigarette, the red sparks gingerly retreating down the white paper. "I don't like it when people lie to me, understand? I know the SPDC is doing stuff with mutants and I know they've got technology they shouldn't have. I want to know where that technology is from and how they obtained it."

The soldier remained defiant. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your choice, mate," said Wisdom. He placed a finger and pressed it against a certain spot on the soldier's chest. "This is a pressure point. Quite painful, actually. Would you like to know what makes it even more painful?"

A hot knife extended from Pete's finger, slowly piercing the soldier's skin, burrowing through his chest until it reached the other end, coming out his back. The soldier clamped down on his teeth, trying to block out the pain, but it wasn't any use. Wisdom jiggled his finger just a bit, widening the hole, taking his sweet time, before he retracted the knife. The soldier let out a gasp of air.

"You know the best thing about having access to white-hot blades?" asked Wisdom. "Whenever I inflict a wound, it's instantly cauterized. So I don't have to worry about getting any blood on my nice, new shirt."

Wisdom placed his finger on the opposite side of the captive's chest, hitting the accompanying pressure point. "And since I'm a symmetrical kind of guy..." The hot knife extended once more, slowly digging into the soldier's flesh. His nerves were on fire, literally, and he tried to move around in his chair, try to get away, but it only made the pain worse. Slowly, Wisdom retracted.

"You going to start talking?" he asked. He started to move his finger around the captive's chest, lightly touching it and slowly moving down south in little semi-circles. That finger moved down the soldier's abdomen, moving closer and closer to his crotch. As soon as the soldier realized this, he tried to protest, screaming out curses in Burmese, but Wisdom ignored every last word.

"This part seems like it would be the most painful," said Wisdom. A hot knife began to emerge and the soldier could feel the heat in his groin. The tip of the knife touched the skin and the smell of cooking flesh filled the room. Wisdom took his sweet time with this attack, building up the threat. And finally, it got to be too much for the captive soldier.

"STOP! STOP! PLEASE STOP!"

"You gonna talk?" asked Wisdom.

"Yes... yes I'll tell you everything I know, just please..."

"Where did Burma get the tech from?" asked Wisdom.

"I don't know all the details... all I know is it came from somewhere nearby... Ships from Africa brought it in, I helped unload it."

"What did you unload?"

"The suits, mostly. There were some other things, too. Collars. We use them on prisoners in Naypyidaw."

"*Mutant* prisoners, right?"

"Right, that's right," said the captive.

"So they're being held in Naypyidaw, all in the same location?"

The soldier nodded.

"Good," said Wisdom. "Give me that location."

---

Brass and Weapon X sat alone in the hotel bar. The assassin removed his mask to look less conspicuous. His head was completely devoid of hair and he only drank water. Brass had a brand of Burmese beer in front of him that he nursed.

Brass had no idea how long they'd been sitting, but he knew the beer had now reached room temperature. Weapon X was hardly a good conversation partner. And after witnessing the way he dispatched some of their enemies, Brass wasn't so sure he was keen on talking with the man anyway, so it seemed like a blessing in disguise.

They heard footsteps and Brass detected the psychic imprint of their leader. Wisdom slid onto the stool next to Brass and motioned to the bartender. "Hardest whiskey you've got, mate."

"So?" asked Brass.

"They're in Naypyidaw," said Wisdom. "That's where the mutant prison is."

"And the tech?"

"We'll discuss that later," said Wisdom. The barkeep brought over a glass of whiskey and Pete downed it in a single gulp.

"You okay?" asked Brass.

"I'll be fine," said Wisdom. He lit a cigarette with a lighter this time and stood. "C'mon, let's go. We've gotta steal a car and get to Naypyidaw, get our friends, and disable the tech."

---

The Sentinels both charged at Dust. In an instant, she dispersed herself into sand particles. They filled the air, clouding the room. The particles began to speed up, moving quicker and quicker into a full-blown sandstorm right in the small cell. At such rapid speed, the particles began

to cut into the Sentinels' armor, tearing through them, sparks flying.

Once Dust collected herself, she placed Maung Sein's arm around her shoulders and took him from the cell. The Sentinels were incapacitated, but not fully destroyed. She chose to take her opportunity while she had one.

Dust escorted Maung Sein back the way she had come. Once she reached Maverick's cell, she motioned to it. "Open the door."

Maung Sein looked at her quizzically. Dust sighed and tried to demonstrate. She pointed at Maung Sein then made a fist and pretended to punch the door. The young mutant looked at her as he carefully imitated her actions.

"Harder!" she said.

He seemed to understand that part and when he punched the door a second time, his diamond fist broke through it. Maung Sein pulled his fist out in shock and watched as Dust opened the door. Maverick sat in the corner, still naked with his eyes closed. He opened one of his eyes to see the commotion.

"You couldn't have given me five more minutes?" he asked. "I was in the middle of a great dream involving... well, nevermind what it involved. Might offend your sensibilities."

Dust crossed her arms. "Let's go."

"You done already?" he asked.

"Not so easy, ran into some trouble," she said. "We have to go. Now."

"Damn," said Maverick, getting to his feet. "What sort of trouble?"

"The warden of this prison as well as man-sized Sentinels."

"Wisdom won't like this..."

"I find I care very little about what Wisdom wants," said Dust.

---

The car stolen by the three remaining members of X-Force pulled up to Naypyidaw. Around them, they sat witness as other military vehicles drove towards the prison. Wisdom stopped the car and stepped outside to get a better look and Brass followed his lead.

"Looks like trouble," said Wisdom.

"You think it has anything to do with Dust and Maverick?"

"I'd say that's a definite possibility. Why not try and reach them?"

Brass closed his eyes and concentrated. He attempted reaching out with his telepathy, trying to contact his teammates. After a few moments, he opened his eyes and shook his head. "No dice. The shielding that interfered with us earlier is still in place."

Weapon X exited from the rear passenger door and ran off into the distance.

"Hey!" Brass called out after his teammate. He looked to Wisdom. "Where the hell's he going?"

"Watch," said Wisdom.

Brass looked on. Weapon X moved for cover in the shadow of a building. As a military jeep drove by, he leapt into the back. The masked, silent assassin quickly disposed of the two men inside and took control of the vehicle, driving it over to his teammates. Weapon X dropped each of the bodies on the ground.

"Looks like we've got our clearance," said Wisdom. He knelt down and started to remove the soldier's uniform.

---

Maverick stood at the edge of a corridor, hearing footsteps from the other end. As a soldier was about to turn the corner, North grabbed him by the head and quickly snapped his neck. He took the soldier's uniform for his own as well as the soldier's rifle.

"Dust, I want you to start releasing these prisoners," he said. "We're going to see to it that Burma is overrun with pissed off mutants."

"What about our new friend?" she asked, motioning to Maung Sein.

"I'll take care of him," said Maverick. "We're going to find this Tun Aung and I have a feeling Maung Sein here will want to meet him one more time."

Dust nodded as her body dissolved into sand, flowing through the corridors of the prison. Like a sandstorm inside, she tore through the doorlocks, causing the cells to open and mutants to emerge from their captivity. Many of them were malnourished and sick, all wearing inhibitor collars. Maverick knew what his own move should be.

---

With all the commotion, X-Force was able to slip in without any trouble. Even without the uniforms, Wisdom imagined they could have come through.

"Can you sense the source?" asked Wisdom.

"Yeah, we're getting close," said Brass, leading the way through the corridors. As they moved about, they came to an intersection where Maverick and Maung Sein ran into them. Both groups drew their weapons before they realized who the other was.

"Where's Dust?" asked Brass.

"Releasing the prisoners," said Maverick. "Wisdom, we've got a big problem here."

"Sentinel tech, I know," said Wisdom.

"We have to get to the central command and disable these collars, then these people can fight back," said Maverick.

"Already on it, Brass is tracking the location by the psychic disturbance," said Wisdom.

"This way," said Brass, motioning for the group to follow him. They moved down a few levels, pushing past rushing soldiers. No one seemed concerned by them, more interested either in escaping or containing the mutants on the upper levels. When they came to the central command, there was only one man standing in the room.

"I see you've finally arrived," said Tun Aung. He slowly turned and smiled at them. "You Americans with your loud, excessive tactics. Do you truly believe you can come in and forcefully shut down this country?"

"Got it wrong, mate, we've got nothing to do with America," said Wisdom. "We're just a group of mutants concerned about what you're doing to our own kind."

"And what makes you think you can do anything to stop us? You are weak, less than nothing," said Tun Aung. "Our force grows with each and every day. More and more technology comes our way and our mutant prisoners help raise our capital."

"We won't do anything to you," said Maverick, turning his aim just slightly. He opened fire but the bullets whizzed past Tun Aung and struck the console behind him. The general leapt away as the console erupted into flames and violent sparks. The lights on Maverick's collar went dim and he tore it from his neck. He knelt down by his captor. "I think some of your citizens would like a word with you."

---

***The Triskelion***

*[[ ...reports pouring in from the Union of Myanmar of mutants rioting in the streets. Alleged abuses of mutant rights have been reported by anonymous sources, accompanied by documentation as well as evidence of mutant restraining devices once used in the island nation of Genosha. The Myanmar military junta has issued a statement claiming that they have neither the resources nor the capacity or even the incentive to imprison a mutant population and they claim the evidence presented is fraudulent and an attempt to discredit their nation. Representatives from the United States and the United Nations offered no comme-- ]]*

Fury turned off the monitor via remote control. He looked at the five members of X-Force who sat around the table.

"You released hundreds of inmates from a military prison, you've unbalanced an already-unstable country, and you got the media to shine its light on Burma," he said. "All I can say to that is good work."

"You... think this is a good thing?" asked Brass.

"I didn't hear any mention of any involvement by SHIELD or any external forces, did you?" asked Fury. "Burma's been a problem for a long time. Way I see it, a mutant uprising is nothing but a good thing. We just gotta keep an eye on it, make sure it doesn't turn into another Genosha."

"Funny you should mention that, Nick," said Wisdom. "See the tech Burma had? Apparently it came from somewhere around Africa. With Genosha unstable and having all that excess anti-mutant technology, doesn't seem like quite a leap to imagine that someone there is shipping mutant-hunting devices to people who shouldn't have it."

"We got any theories yet?" asked Fury.

"A few suspects."

"Good, start exploring them."

---



**The  
100  
Today**

**Miles**

**Southwest**

**of**

**Block**

**Triskelion  
Island**

*[[ Peter Winston Wisdom. ]]*

**Pete  
Wisdom**

"That's my name," said Wisdom. "If you need to confirm that innocuous piece of information, you lot aren't too good at your job, are you?"



**Maverick**

*[[ Just a formality, Mr. Wisdom. ]]*

"How's this for a formality?" asked Wisdom, sticking his middle finger in front of the camera. He sat in a cold, metal chair. The room was empty save for a surveillance camcorder in the corner of the darkened room and an intercom provided the voice of the speaker. The only light came from a lamp which hung from the ceiling, rocking slightly, swinging the spotlight to and fro.



**Brass**

*[[ Very mature, Mr. Wisdom. ]]*

"Look, I was hired to do a job an' I'd rather get back to it, if you don't mind. This is a waste of my time and yours. These investigations do absolutely nothing except make the public feel better about where their tax dollars are going to."



**Weapon X**

*[[ And is that what you're suggesting, Mr. Wisdom? That we just let you go about your business? ]]*

Wisdom produced a cigarette from a pack labeled Silk Cuts. He looked inside the now empty pack and crushed it in his palm before dropping it on the ground. "Mind getting me some fags?"



**Dust**

*[[ Depends on how much you're willing to cooperate with us. ]]*

"A bottle of scotch, too--nothing younger than twelve years," said Wisdom. Heat rose from the tip of his finger as he lit his cigarette. "And do hurry, or I'll just have them send over another waitress."

*[[ Do you find this funny, Mr. Wisdom? ]]*



**Nick Fury**

"No," said Wisdom. "I find it bloody hysterical."

*[[ After what happened, we must pursue all avenues available to us. Our first order of business is to question the CO of the unit being investigated, which is you. Are you or are you not the commanding officer of the X-Force unit? ]]*

"X-Force doesn't exist, love," said Wisdom. "It was dismantled after that bit of nastiness with General Mayer, or did you forget?"

*[[ We're well aware of that situation, it's in the op reports. What we need now is to*

*talk about what happened next. We are aware of the employment of you and several other mutant operatives within SHIELD. ]]*

"Big whoop, SHIELD has mutants on its payroll, since when is this news?"

*[[ Since those mutants attempted to stage a coup in Genosha as cover for releasing a known criminal from prison, a criminal who just so happened to be the father of the late Lydia Del Ruiz. ]]*

"The Resistants were hardly a stable bunch," said Wisdom. "They once worked for Magneto and they were reduced to low-level positions. They had motive and opportunity, so they *took* it. There's absolutely no evidence linking either SHIELD, myself, nor anyone who worked under me to that incident."

*[[ And what about illegally invading the Union of Myanmar and releasing hundreds of mutants from a Burmese prison? ]]*

"The cyclone caused lots of problems in that region, easy enough for something like this to happen during a natural disaster," said Wisdom. "Especially when you're talking about a place like Burma. I doubt they've got Stark Enterprises providing them with the same technology the Vault gets. Making it even easier for prisoners with powers to break out."

*[[ And the Niles Roman affair? ]]*

"Look, you're barking up the wrong tree, whoever you are," said Wisdom. "I don't even know who that is."

---

**Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents**



**ASK DNA  
Part One**

By [Dino Pollard](#)

---

**Panorama  
Mae**

**Hong**

**Son,**

**Hotel  
Thailand**

## **One Month Earlier**

*[[ SHIELD's getting reports from Laos, Thailand and China that mutants are crossing the border from Burma. ]]*

"That's to be expected when you shut down a prison," said Wisdom, a cigarette dangling from two fingers, a glass of scotch in the other hand. Before him sat an open laptop with the image of Nick Fury, Director of SHIELD, staring back at him via webcam.

*[[ Any leads on the tech you found in Burma? ]]*

"Not much," said Wisdom. "Word is it came from somewhere in Africa. Only one place I know of that's likely to have Sentinel tech stockpiled away somewhere."

*[[ Genosha. ]]*

"Right under Glorious Leader Magneto's nose I bet, too," said Wisdom. "If this gets out, it could cause a massive international incident."

*[[ Don't even think about it, Wisdom. ]]*

"What do you mean? Magneto gets pissed and starts searching for the culprits, basically doing our work for us, pressure is put on Burma by the international community, and mutant rights get thrust into the spotlight."

*[[ Kinda like Darfur's been thrust into the spotlight? ]]* asked Fury. *[[ Think about it, Wisdom--rest of the world doesn't give a damn about human rights violations anymore, especially not when it comes to mutants. Tipping Magneto to this could set off a powderkeg in Genosha and that's the last thing we need. And when Burma's confronted with something on a national scale, they have a tendency to shut down outside access completely then brutalize their own people. And since those people need humanitarian aid right now, that's not a risk I'm willing to take. ]]*

Wisdom sighed and took a drag on his cigarette. "Hey Nicky... you remember when we could tell the good guys from the bad? Back when the world was black and white?"

*[[ Who the hell are you kidding, Pete? The world was **never** black and white. There were **never** any easy choices. Where are you now? ]]*

"Thailand, Mae Hong Son province," said Wisdom.

*[[ Lay low for a bit, take a little vacation. If any questions come up about the mutant refugees, we'll blame it on fallout from the cyclone. Fury out. ]]*

"Right," said Wisdom. He heard a knock on the door, and pointed his finger at it, prepared for an attack. "Come in."

The door opened and a young Afghani woman stood in the frame. Pete relaxed his

body and took a sip from his scotch. "Something you need, Dust? Shouldn't you be out on the town with Mav and Brass?"

"We don't share the idea of a good time," said Dust.

"Right, 'course you don't," said Wisdom. "So what are you doing in *my* room?" He raised his glass and cigarette. "I *clearly* don't share your idea of a good time."

"How much longer are we here?" she asked.

"Bit surprised to find you wanting to return Stateside."

"No, just interested in finding our brethren and helping them," she said. "Those refugees are going to need someone to guide them or else they may end up in another prison."

"Relax, we shut down Tun Aung's operation and right now the cyclone is the junta's main concern," said Wisdom. "So it'll be some time before he can cause any more headaches. Assuming those prisoners even left him breathing."

"And you think that was the *only* mutant prison in Asia?"

Wisdom raised an eyebrow. "Come again?"

Dust scoffed. "Cambodia. Vietnam. Afghanistan. Pakistan. China. *All* of them have prisons, all of them imprison mutants."

"Oh wow, I'm so shocked. You've *completely* opened my eyes. I had no idea mutants were so persecuted around the world." Wisdom rolled his eyes. "How long you think I've been doing this, girl? I was *at* some of those prisons, so was North. We know all about it."

"How can you be so callous to your own kind?" asked Dust. She turned but Wisdom grabbed her wrist.

"Let me tell you something, and I'm going to be very clear on this," he began. "There are few people who have worked harder and more thanklessly for mutant rights than me. I *know* what lurks in those shadows. I *know* how scary the world really is. This is the kind of stuff Xavier's lot never even *dreamed* of. Yes, mutant rights violations happen every day and I've got news for you--it's not just Asia. It happens on every continent in every country across the world, just like *human* rights violations do. Changing the world is a noble goal and I know we're all told from birth that one man can make a difference, but the truth is it's all bollocks. We'll *never* stop it. For every prison we shut down, ten more pop up. For every mass-murderer we kill, a thousand others are ready to pick up his sword. That's just the way of the world and it's been like that since the dawn of man."

"So why do we bother?" asked Dust.

"Because we do what we can," said Wisdom. "Even though we can't stop it, we can

slow it down and that's better than nothing.

---

Brass threw back his whiskey in one gulp and slammed it on the counter, the glass clinking as he did. "Another," he said.

"Think you ought to take it easy," said Maverick, sipping his own drink.

"After the nastiness we saw in Burma, I'm entitled to a bit of hard drinking," said Brass. "Barkeep! Another!"

"It's part of the job," said Maverick.

"And what about that masked lunatic slashing open throats and cutting off heads?" asked Brass. "Never seen something so brutal. When I saw that, I wondered *why* Wisdom would bring someone like *that* onboard. And then Pete goes and tortures that soldier. Is all that part of the job?"

Maverick paused and took a sip of his whiskey. He calmly set the glass down and looked at his new teammate and said only one word: "Yes."

"What?" asked Brass.

"It's all part of the job," said Maverick. "Every dirty aspect of it. We play a very dangerous game, Sean. We move people where we want to further our goal. We manipulate them and we sacrifice them when necessary and it's all because we have to capture the king. It's one massive game of chess. We play dirty because we can't afford to play nice. Let Captain America be the shining beacon for hope in the world, we've got a role to play that's more important."

"That's disgusting," said Brass.

"That's black ops," said Maverick. "If you don't like it, you can go back to crowd control with SHIELD."

"And what would Fury think of these methods?" asked Brass.

At this, Maverick started to laugh.

"Did I say something funny?" asked Brass.

"What would Fury think of these methods?" asked Maverick, repeating his teammate's words. "Nick Fury was in World War II. He was there when the Cold War started. He fought in 'Nam. He watched as the Berlin Wall fell and he stayed in the game to see another Cold War begin. My friend, no one knows this world better than Nick Fury--he wrote the *book* on good guys doing bad things. He might smile and shake hands with Tony Stark and Reed Richards but if they had even the slightest inkling of the things he's done, they probably wouldn't be so friendly with him."

"What have I gotten myself into?" asked Brass.



would most-likely be dead. Instead of letting the poor man suffer, Weapon X laid his palm against the man's head.

*"I'll take the pain."*

---

***The  
100  
Today***      ***Miles***      ***Southwest***      ***of***      ***Block***      ***Triskelion  
Island***

"For the last time, X-Force doesn't *exist*," said Wisdom.

The door to the room opened and a man walked in dressed in a navy-blue uniform with white trim. His hair was gray at the temples, the only indication of his age, and a patch covered his left eye. A cigar sat between his lips, surrounded by beard stubble on his chin.

"What's going on here?" asked Wisdom.

"Just answer the questions, Pete," said Fury. "Full disclosure time. I can't protect you anymore."

---



**The Triskelion**  
**100 Miles Southwest of Block Island**  
**Today**

"Hello Nick, fancy seeing you here," said Wisdom. "Don't suppose you have a fag on you?"

**Pete Wisdom**

Fury held a pack of Pall Malls in his hand. He held it out to Wisdom. The Englishman drew one and placed it between his lips. Fury offered a match, but Wisdom already set it aflame with the tip of his finger.



"Handy trick."

"They're not Silk Cuts, but they'll do," said Wisdom, looking at the cigarette. "So what's this all about, Nicky?"

**Maverick**



"Like I said, Wisdom—full disclosure time," said Fury. "I can't protect you or your team anymore. Not after what happened."

"Wouldn't be long before it all went to hell in a handbag, eh?" asked Wisdom. "Guess we should've known better."

"Or at least *you* should have."

**Brass**



"True," said Wisdom.

"You weren't careful enough when you put your team together," said Fury. "If you looked a bit closer, you probably could've seen what was going on."

"Maybe, maybe not," said Wisdom. "But it's all part of the plan, isn't it, Fury? All part of the big, bad military-industrial complex. And all of us—the superheroes, the soldiers, the spies—we're all just cogs in the machine. We tried to work with the system and the system bugged us. That's the way it always works. No justice for the downtrodden."

**Weapon X**



He took a long drag on the cigarette before staring directly up at Fury.

"Or the mutants."

**Dust**



**Nick Fury**

"Don't play the gene card with me, Pete," said Fury. "I brought you onboard this operation because I wanted to help out your people. I was tryin' to do the right thing. And in the end, all you brought me was trouble."

"The scales have been tipped, Nick," said Wisdom. "Dead mutants rising from the grave, knowing that one of the greatest acts of genocide in history occurred because human governments were not only stockpiling, but improving and adapting robot Gestapo. Did you really think there *wasn't* going to be any retaliation for that? *Especialy* after what we found in Thailand."

---

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents



**ASK DNA**  
**Part Two**

By [Dino Pollard](#)

---

***Panorama Hotel***  
***Mae Hong Son, Thailand***  
***One Month Earlier***

Pete Wisdom looked at the three men Weapon X had incapacitated. While sleeping, the former assassin picked up the stray thoughts of a young man whose kidneys were being harvested by these three. He leapt into action, quickly taking down the three thugs.

Unfortunately, the man was too far gone, so Weapon X went into his mind and helped him to die peacefully.

Now, Wisdom, Dust and Weapon X stood before the three culprits, each of them with a pillowcase over their head. Wisdom looked at Weapon X. "You did good, lad. Keeping them alive means we can get some information out of them."

The door to the room opened and Maverick and Brass entered. "DNA scan confirms it," said Maverick. "The victim was a mutant."

"That's what I thought," said Wisdom.

"Would it have mattered if he wasn't?" asked Brass.

"Not to sound callous, but yes," said Wisdom. "We deal with mutant rights violations. If the victim was human, we would've turned this over to some other division at SHIELD."

"Your sympathy knows no bounds," Brass dryly remarked.

Wisdom turned and walked past Brass. As he did, he whispered to him,

"follow me." Before reaching the door, he spoke louder so the others could hear: "interrogate them. You know what I mean."

With Brass in tow, Wisdom stepped out into the hallway. Brass folded his arms and looked at his commanding officer. "Something wrong?"

"Yeah, you," said Wisdom. "I respect the fact that you've got some kind of moral code you want to stick to. But there are some things you have to realize, mate—we're not superheroes, okay? Mutant rights are violated every day and if we start expanding our reach, going after every violation we find, even ones that don't happen to mutants, we lose focus. The fire brigade takes care of burning buildings, the cops handle the bank robbers, the superheroes deal with the planetary threats, and we're the ones who go after the ones who hurt mutants. This is a delicate operation we're running. If you've got a problem with the job we do or the methods we use, then you're free to leave any time you like."

Brass remained stoic in his expression, not willing to give in to Wisdom even a bit. But it was obvious the Englishman awaited a response and to spur that response, he finally said: "now, are you quite through wasting my time? Because I'd *really* like to get back to work."

Still, Brass remained silent. Wisdom lit a cigarette. "Fine by me. Once this job's done, I'll pass on your transfer request to Fury."

"...I don't want a transfer," said Brass.

"Good," said Wisdom, his hand on the doorknob. "Then shut the bloody hell up already."

He walked back into the room to find one of the men naked and Dust in a pile of sand. The man grit his teeth in extreme pain. Wisdom looked at Maverick and motioned to the man.

"She's in her sand form, burrowing into his skin," responded Maverick.

"Anything yet?" asked Wisdom. Maverick shook his head.

"He's a tough nut to crack."

"We'll see," said Wisdom. "Dust, if you can hear me love, I want you to start moving around in circles, Don't just go straight in."

In response, the man cried out even louder this time and Wisdom surmised she had heard him and did as she was told.

"Ready to sing me a song, little birdy?" asked Wisdom, blowing smoke into the man's face.

"Okay! Okay!" the man screamed.

"Who are you working for?" asked Wisdom. "None of you seem like you have the brain capacity to run an operation like this."

"Hired... freelance... we're given the names of donors, take them out, and deliver the organs at the drop point..."

"You're given *names* of donors?" asked Wisdom. "Like a donor list?"

The man shook his head. "I don't know... they just tell us where we should get the organs from... no substitutes allowed..."

"Your employers, have you met them before?" asked Maverick.

The man shook his head.

"So they don't know what you look like, do they?" asked Wisdom.

"No, we meet through intermediaries," said the man. "But they do something to the organs first."

"What do they do?" asked Wisdom.

"Use some sort of machine... scan them or something, I don't know," said the man. "If it's good, then we get our money."

"And if it's bad?" asked Wisdom.

"Never happened, but I'm guessing they're not too happy."

Wisdom looked up at the rest of the team. "They scan the organs, eh?"

"DNA test, maybe?" asked Brass. "If they have specific donors they want, could be checking for DNA match."

Dust slowly emerged from the man's body and began to reform herself, speaking as she did. "They're checking to see that the organs belong to a mutant."

"Why mutant organs?" asked Brass. "What's special about our organs?"

"Every mutant is a universal donor," said Maverick. "One of the little perks of being part of an evolved species."

"Universal organs can get quite a high price on the black market," said Wisdom. "But I wonder... what would happen if we turned over human organs? North, we have any image inducers?"

"I think so," said Maverick. "Why?"

"Because we're going to pose as these three, go to the drop point, and give

them human organs instead. Then, we see what happens.”

“Sounds like a suicide mission,” said Brass.

“Just go help Maverick with the image inducers,” said Wisdom. He looked back to his prisoner. “Now you—where’s the drop point?”

“Where... where are you getting the organs?”

“Where else, mate?” asked Wisdom.

“Then... I don’t tell you anything, not unless I go free.”

“Or, we could do it this way,” said Wisdom. “Either you tell us where the drop is or I decide I want to play surgeon. And I don’t use pain killers, so you get to feel every cut as I remove every organ I can find. Oh, and the blood loss won’t kill you.”

Wisdom lifts his finger and a hot knife forms at the end. “These things cauterize the wound instantly. So no mess and I get to keep you alive for a *lot* longer.”

Wisdom circled the hot knife in front of the man’s eyes. “Now then... the drop point. Please.”

---

### **Bangkok**

Wisdom, Maverick and Weapon X sat in a bar, masked by image inducers to make themselves look like the organ thieves. At Weapon X’s feet was the cooler with one of the men’s kidneys inside.

“Brass may be trouble,” said Wisdom in a low voice.

“I get that feeling, too,” said Maverick. “He didn’t know what he signed up for.”

“He’s gotta learn real fast,” said Wisdom. “If he doesn’t come through this time, I’m putting in a transfer request.”

“A four-man team?” asked Maverick. “We’ll need a replacement.”

“I’ve already started running down a list of names in my head.”

“Such as...?”

“Not quite up for sharing just yet,” said Wisdom. “No one we’ve worked with in the past, though. At least... no one *I*’ve worked with.”

Maverick looked at Wisdom with curiosity. "Oh...?"

"Just trust me on this," said Wisdom. He stood suddenly. "Here comes Suran."

A Thai man walked over to them, greeted them, then sat across. "How did it go?" he asked.

"Not a problem," said Wisdom. He nodded to Weapon X, who slid the cooler over. Suran discretely opened the cooler and held a small device in his hand. He stuck it inside the kidney, drawing out a bit of blood. A progress bar appeared on the small monitor.

"Just a formality," said Suran. "You've done good work for us in the past and my employer has been quite pleased with you."

"We're always up for more work," said Wisdom.

The device beeped and Suran looked down. His eyes widened when the word NEGATIVE appeared on the screen. "What is this...? You try to pass off a *fake* on me?"

From behind, a hand gripped Suran's forehead and he suddenly felt the edge of a knife against his throat. Brass stood behind him, looking down at his face. The other three deactivated their image inducers, flickering into view for Suran in their true forms.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Suran.

"Seems pretty simple, mate," said Wisdom. "We're here to learn more about your employer. Who he is, what he's doing, all that fun stuff. You feeling chatty?"

Suran spat in Wisdom's face. "You can go fuck yourself, Englishman."

Wisdom nonchalantly wiped the saliva from his face before he said, "I'm going to enjoy torturing you."

---

***The Triskelion  
100 Miles Southwest of Block Island  
Today***

"So what have we got so far, Wisdom?" asked Fury as he circled around Pete. He counted on his fingers. "Illegally operating in a number of sovereign nations, murder, kidnapping, torture, destruction of government property... anything I'm missing?"

"Yeah, one thing," said Wisdom. "You gave me full permission to do all that."

Fury glared at Wisdom with his one good eye. "Think you're pretty funny, eh Wisdom?"

"Course I do, Nicky," said Wisdom. "The birds love a sense of humor."

"How funny is this, then?" asked Fury. A buzzer sounded and an agent walked in the door, holding a file folder. He handed it to Fury before leaving. Nick opened it and removed a photo, tossing it at Wisdom's feet.

Pete picked up the photo, looking at it carefully. The picture was of Suran. In a uniform.

"He worked for Interpol," said Fury. "They were already aware of Roman's operation and working to bring it down from the inside. But then you came along and fucked it all up."

The photo burst into flames in Wisdom's hand and he dropped it. Both he and Fury stared at each other through the flickering wisps of yellow and orange until the flames could sustain themselves no longer and the picture was reduced to ash.

"Bull and shit, Nick," said Wisdom. "If Interpol was so interested in Roman, they had plenty of evidence to take him into custody. But they held off. And do you know *why* they held off?"

"No," said Fury. "But I'm sure *you* do."

"Of course I do, I didn't get to where I am by sitting behind a desk, puffing on a cigar and wondering what happened to the days when I actually had some relevance in this bloody world," said Wisdom.

Fury sprung forward, his fist connecting with Wisdom's jaw. Pete's head rocked to the side and he spit blood. He looked up at Fury with a grin on his face. "You're washed up, Nicky. That Infinity Formula doesn't give you the same kick it used to, does it? Your starting to feel your age, aren't you?"

"Finish your goddamn story," said Fury. "I'm getting tired of listening to your bullshit."

"Too bad you know it's all true," said Wisdom. "But I'll play your game, you sodding fascist. You want to know why Interpol didn't move in on Roman? Because the organ harvesting was only a small part of his operation. He had something much bigger going on. Something several of the governments that finance Interpol had an active interest in. You've got it all wrong, Fury. Suran wasn't working for Interpol—Roman was."

---



**The Triskelion**  
**100 Miles Southwest of Block Island**  
**Today**

"You wanna run that by me again?" asked Fury.

**Pete  
Wisdom**

Wisdom put the Pall Mall cigarette between his lips, while staring directly at Fury, he took a very long, very slow, very deliberate drag on the cigarette. Once he was satisfied with the amount of smoke filtering into his mouth, he pulled the cigarette away, carefully parted his lips, and let the smoke trail out at a leisurely pace.



"Ahh..." he said, holding the cigarette up. "This, Nick old son, is what keeps me going in the morning."

**Maverick**

"Just get on with your story," said Fury. "You're wastin' my time, Wisdom."



"It's just like I told you, Suran was just an underling," said Wisdom. "Sure, he was an Interpol agent, but he wasn't working undercover, despite what Interpol may have told you. No, Suran was there as a liaison between Interpol and Roman."

**Brass**

"How did you come about that information?" asked Fury.



"I can be very... convincing," said Wisdom.

"So we can add assaulting an agent of law enforcement to your laundry list of sins now, can't we?" asked Fury.

**Weapon X**

"It's all part of the game, Nick," said Wisdom. "You do whatever you can to win, because you can't afford to lose. You *knew* that when you hired me. You *knew* that when you made X-Force your own secret unit. You *knew* all along that we couldn't afford to appear on SHIELD's payroll, there couldn't be any record of us. You did all that because you knew the kind of jobs we would be taking, the kind of tactics we would be using. It's a dark world and it gets darker every day. I don't like what I do, but I do it anyway—I do it because it's very, very necessary."



**Dust**

"Don't give me none'a that greater good bullshit, Wisdom. I've been to all the dark places you have and a good many more, but I always knew my place. I knew there was a line we do not cross. Except for you, there is *no* line. You'll do whatever it takes to get the job done."



**Mystique**

"You're bloody right I would," said Wisdom. "And here's something else, Fury—I'd do it all again in a heartbeat."

Fury produced a cigar from his belt and lit it with a wood match. Once he extinguished the match, he looked down at Wisdom.



**Nick Fury**

"Okay, you ambushed Suran in Bangkok," he said. "What then?"

---

**Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents**



**ASK DNA  
Part Three**

By [Dino Pollard](#)

---

***Bangkok, Thailand  
One Month Earlier***

Weapon X's fist connected with Suran's jaw, backed with the strength of his forcefield. Suran's head snapped to the side from the force of the blow, spitting out a tooth. Weapon X stepped to the side. Suran sat in a small, metal folding chair, his arms bound behind him, his feet tied to the legs. Across from him was Pete Wisdom, sitting backwards in a similar chair. His arms rested on the chair's back as he puffed on a Silk Cut cigarette. Maverick, Brass and Dust all stood by his side and watched Suran with blank faces.

"Do you know who we are?" asked Wisdom.

Suran shook his head.

"Good," said Wisdom. He stood from the chair and slowly approached his prisoner. "Do you know who *I* am?"

Suran looked up into Wisdom's face. He looked the man up and down, racking his brain for some memory but he could find none. He shook his head once more.

"Well, the name's Pete Wisdom, lad," he began. "Does that ring any bells?"

Again, Suran shook his head. Wisdom knelt down in front of him, blowing smoke in his face. Suran turned his head to try and avoid it, but that just made Wisdom smile and continue.

"That's good, too. And do you know why?"

Suran sighed and for what seemed like the umpteenth time, shook his head.

"Because that means you don't know what to expect," said Wisdom. He stood and slowly circled Suran as his team just glared at the prisoner. "You see... you don't know whether I'll be a good cop... or a bad cop."

He motioned to Weapon X with a jerk of his thumb. "And you don't know how crazy this right old bastard is." He moved his finger to Brass. "Or how crazy the bloke with the knife is. Or the girl with the hood. Or the guy with the gold mask. You've got no idea how any of them will react."

Wisdom bent over Suran's shoulder, whispering into his ear. "Isn't anticipation *fun*? Like a kid on Christmas Eve, waiting for Santa to come down the chimney so he can open up his presents.

"But I will tell you this, mate. All of us here? There are two things we have in common. The first is, we're all mutants. And the second is, we all love torturing people who harm mutants.

"So I think it's safe to say, you are in a world of shit, mate."

Maverick drew his Glock and aimed it at Suran. Almost instinctively, Wisdom held up his hand to Maverick, indicating he should holster it. David North complied with the order. Wisdom looked to Suran. "See what I mean? That one's got an itchy trigger finger."

"What do you want?" asked Suran.

"I want to know why you're harvesting mutant organs and I want to know who you're working for," said Wisdom. "But more importantly, I want to know where I can find the bastard, so I can give him a taste of what it feels like when a mutant harvests *his* organs."

Suran began to laugh. "Do you really think I'm going to give him up for you? You think you come anywhere *near* his level? You're nothing, Mr. Wisdom. A big, fat nobody. You think you're someone scary, you don't know shit."

"Right then," said Wisdom. He looked at the rest of X-Force. "Take a walk, children. Uncle Pete needs to have a private chit-chat with Mr. Suran here."

---

***Magda Square, Genosha  
Five Weeks Earlier***

"It's dangerous for you to have an open line like this," she said.

{Think I don't know that, love? But time's running short. I need your help

and I need it now.}

Raven Darkholme stretched out on her bed, her indigo-colored body clothed by a black tank top and red, leather pants that matched her hair. She watched Pete Wisdom with yellow eyes through the video chat on her laptop.

"Last I heard, you wanted me to keep an eye on Magneto for you while you're off having all the fun."

{Plans change. We just had a run-in with a mutant prison in Burma. One of the interesting things about this prison? They were using Sentinel technology.}

"And?" asked Mystique. "That technology is all over the black market. The Russians used to have quite an anti-mutant program set up and ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia's become an arms dealer's playground."

{This stuff isn't from Russia. In fact, it comes from somewhere a bit closer to home. For you, anyway.}

Mystique sat upright on the bed. "You can't be serious..."

Wisdom lit a cigarette on his end. {I'm afraid so, love. That technology is being smuggled out from Genosha and it's up to you to find it.}

"Do I have anything else to go on?" asked Mystique.

{Yeah, don't look for a direct line from Genosha to Asia. It goes through Africa first. Obviously not Wakanda, but focus on unstable nations. Warlords, that sort of thing. People who would have no use for the stuff but have no qualms about selling it and letting it go for cheap.}

"And I assume I'll be on my own in this," said Mystique.

{For now. But if the time comes when you need help, you'll have it.}

"You'll be my knight in shining armor, Wisdom?"

Pete offered a sly grin. {Who said anything about me?}

The line went dead with that last word. Mystique sighed and her hand went under her pillow to draw out a Desert Eagle. She checked the magazine before sliding it back in.

---

***Bangkok, Thailand  
One Month Earlier***

Suran cried out in pain as Wisdom slow sliced off another bit of his pinkie with one of his mutant hot knives. Wisdom raised the hot knife to his lips and

said, "shh..." Tears welled up in Suran's eyes instead.

"It's okay, it's okay," said Wisdom. He took Suran's hand in his own and held up the pinkie for Suran to see. "Look, no blood. It's all fine."

Suran's eyes looked at Wisdom. "You... you sick bastard!"

"Of course, mate," said Wisdom. "But what did you expect? What, did you think I was making idle threats when I told you I would torture you?"

The hot knife emerged once again and Wisdom waved it in front of Suran's face. "So mate... what's next?"

He grabbed Suran's hand. The prisoner tried to struggle, tried to pull away, but Wisdom held firm and began to slowly cut into the pinkie again. And once again, Suran screamed from the pain.

"So what's it gonna be, lad? You still want to play the role of tough guy?"

"You... you don't understand," said Suran. "If you go after Roman, you are entering... a world of shit."

"That's just the way I like it," said Wisdom. "Idle threats don't scare me, mate."

Suran began to laugh.

"Something funny?"

"Yeah... I'm laughing because you have no idea what you're getting yourself into," said Suran. "So sure, I'll tell you who's behind this."

"I'm all ears."

"His name's... Niles Roman," said Suran. "And I'm telling you right now, there is *nothing* that can prepare you for what you're about to get involved with. You are fucking with some very powerful people, Mr. Wisdom. People you do *not* want to get mixed up with."

"We'll see about that," said Wisdom. "Where is he?"

"Siberia... an old gulag," said Suran.

"Why mutant organs?"

"Universal donors... high value on the black market..." said Suran. "But as far as why does Roman do it? It's to fund his other experiments. Ones that his powerful friends need his help with."

---

**Port Victoria**  
**Republic of Seychelles**  
**One Month Earlier**

Raven Darkholme emerged from the ship's hull, aiding with the unloading of the shipment. Her mutant powers of shapeshifting enabled her to look just like one of the crew. After some investigating, she determined that the only shipment route from Hammer Bay to Africa was through Port Victoria, which made it the first place to check.

Her task was to simply unload the crates into the warehouse, then she was to board the ship and head back to Hammer Bay. Apparently, they used a different crew to move the shipments from Port Victoria to Asia. But where that crew was, she had no idea.

While watching her crewmates board the ship, Raven slipped away, morphing as she went, continuously changing her disguise in order to throw off anyone who may have spotted her.

She heard voices and pressed herself against the wall. She morphed again, her body taking on the color and texture of the wall. Had anyone looked closer, they may have spotted her. But just passing by, she was easy to miss. Once they passed by, Raven followed them. She peered around the corner and watched as they entered the warehouse. Raven looked down at her hand and it morphed into a suction-like claw that allowed her to climb the side of the building.

As soon as she reached an appropriate vantage point, she peered through a window. A limousine approached from outside and the doors opened for it. Once inside, two armed guards in suits and wearing white masks stepped out of the front. Out of the back came two more. The white masks had slits for the eyes and mouth and there was a familiarity about them. One of the guards held the door open and a woman stepped out. Her appearance caused Raven's eyes to widen in shock.

The woman had pale skin, a sharp contrast from her jet-black hair which was pulled into a bun, save for bangs that framed her face. Beneath each eye was a sort of facial tattoo, almost like a scar. She wore a form-fitting leather bodice. Mystique knew where she recognized the masks from—they were the masks worn by guards of the Hellfire Club. And the woman who was with them was a woman who should have been dead.

A woman named Tessa.

"It took you long enough, my dear," came a voice. Tessa looked to see another woman approach from the darkness. She wore green and blue armor and had short, dark hair.

"We need to get this next shipment out immediately, Astra," said Tessa. "You know how Mr. Shaw feels about delays."

Shaw! Mystique's blood began to boil. Shinobi Shaw, that sniveling little turncoat. She should have guessed the head of Shaw Industries was selling Sentinel technology on the black market. Doing it legally was no longer an option, especially with him working for Magneto. But illegally? Under the table? That was another matter entirely.

"Child's play, my dear," said Astra. She waved her hands and the crates began to vanish, one by one, from the storage facility. Transported to their destination, wherever that may be. Most-likely a government hostile to mutants.

Mystique was tempted to leap into the fray and kill both Tessa and Astra right here and right now, but she knew that would be a suicide mission. No, she would report back to Wisdom on what she found.

"Excuse me."

Mystique jerked her head around. Standing on the ground were two Hellfire Club guards, both of them with machine guns trained on her. They opened fire.

---

Wisdom untied Suran's legs and his other hand, then pulled the chair out from under him, letting him fall to the ground.

"Get out of here," said Wisdom.

Suran moved for the door but he saw his gun sitting on a table. He rushed for it and Wisdom brandished his hot knives. "Easy mate, one of these will go through your head before you've pulled the trigger."

"Who said I was going for you?" asked Suran with a smile. He put the gun against his chin and fired.

The door opened again and the rest of X-Force poured inside. "What was that?" asked Maverick.

"Suran," said Wisdom. "He gave me what we needed to know, so I let him go."

"Just to shoot him?" asked Brass.

"No," said Wisdom. "He did that to himself."

Maverick nodded. "Okay then."

"You believe that?" asked Brass.

"Even if I don't, it hardly matters now, does it?" asked Maverick.

"What did you find out?" asked Dust.

"The man in charge is Niles Roman, he's operating out of an old gulag in Siberia," said Wisdom. "Which means his operation stretches past Thailand. We're going to Russia."

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**

**Port Victoria  
Republic of Seychelles  
One Month Earlier**

They say that before you die, your life flashes before your eyes. For Raven Darkholme, that's true. As the bullets exploded from the guns of guards wearing Hellfire Club masks and dressed in suits, the life of the woman who has gone by many identities flashed before her. Too quick to recall anything, just a rapid succession of random images from her memory.



**Maverick**

But before she could feel the bullets tearing through her indigo skin, something large and heavy fell on top of her knocking her to the ground. She could feel hot breath on her neck, she heard a low growl and almost instantly, the weight had been lifted from her. She looked up and saw the form of a large man with long, blond hair, dressed in a trench coat with fur collar. His fingers were tipped with razor-sharp claws and he used them to tear the guards to ribbons, blood flowing freely like a shower of scarlet.



**Brass**

A lithe hand came into Raven's field of vision. She looked up at the source and saw a woman—slim, young, pretty—dressed in a black leather cat suit and holding a .45 in her other hand. Mystique accepted the offer and got to her feet.



**Weapon X**

"And who are you?" asked the shape-shifter.

"Prudence Leighton," she said. "And that's—"

"I know who *that* is," muttered Mystique.

And she did. Not only by reputation, but also personally and, for a brief moment, intimately. They first met years ago in Europe where they had a short tryst that resulted in the birth of Graydon Creed, famed human superiority activist and advocate of mutant genocide.



**Dust**

When they met again, it was in the government-sanctioned mutant strike force called X-Factor. Both of them forced to work with the team as a way to atone for their past crimes. He eventually escaped, nearly mauled the entire team. Needless to say, it wasn't pretty and X-Factor shortly dissolved after that.



**Mystique**

His name was Victor Creed, called Sabretooth. Murderer, sociopath, mercenary, soldier, even X-Man. Last Mystique heard, he was at large somewhere in America. So just what the hell was he doing here?

Creed was as vicious and bloodthirsty as she remembered, tearing through the guards with quarter neither asked nor given. Although Mystique wished she could be disgusted at this display, in truth she was a little relieved to watch these men die well-deserved deaths.



**Prudence  
Leighton**

A body fell before the two women and Sabretooth walked towards them, licking the blood from his hands. "Sorry you had t' see that."

"No you're not," said Mystique.

"Unfortunately it looks like we're a bit too late," said Prudence. "Tessa and Astra have both left. With the Sentinel tech."



**Sabretooth**

"Would someone mind telling me just what the hell is going on here?" asked Mystique.

"You're in Port Victoria, that's my jurisdiction," said Prudence.

"I know, Wisdom told me about you," said Mystique. She pointed at Sabretooth. "I was referring to *him*. What the hell are *you* doing here?"



**Nick Fury**

"Petey didn't tell you, eh?" asked Creed with a toothy grin.

"Tell me *what*?" asked Mystique.

"Pru an' me, we're your back-up," said Creed. "Welcome to X-Force, babe."

---

**Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents**



**ASK DNA  
Part Four**

By [Dino Pollard](#)

---

***Siberia, Russia  
One Month Earlier***

A small, private airfield served as their destination. The chartered plane touched down on the tarmac and the hatch opened, allowing the five occupants to set foot on Russian soil. Once he set his feet on the ground, Pete Wisdom breathed the air deeply.

"Smell that," he said. "Fresh air. Nice, isn't it?"

He placed a Silk Cut cigarette between his lips and ignited it with the Zippo lighter he carried with him.

Maverick followed him from the plane, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. It was quite heavy due to all his gear contained inside. Brass and Weapon X each held bags, although not as heavy as Maverick's. Wisdom and Dust had simple, light sacks containing their clothes and personal items.

"We're here, now what?" asked Dust.

"Get ourselves a car, check into a hotel, and get a good night's rest before we go after Roman," said Wisdom.

"Do we have any idea what we're going up against?" asked Maverick.

"Not a one, so as soon as we get set up, we go into research mode, find out what sort of bastard we're dealing with, see if SHIELD has any info on him," said Wisdom. "I'm hoping the answer there is yes."

A car sat nearby on the tarmac, unattended. Wisdom motioned to it with a jerk of his thumb. "My, my, it looks like someone has misplaced their vehicle."

The five individuals approached the car and Brass opened the driver-side door. He looked up at Wisdom and nodded. "Keys are in the ignition."

"How sloppy of someone," said Maverick.

"Yes, quite sloppy," said Wisdom. "We must do our duty as responsible citizens and take this vehicle to the local constabulary."

"After we're done with it," said Maverick.

"Of course, after we're done with it," said Wisdom. "Besides, we'll only be making two stops on the way."

They climbed into the car left for them by SHIELD. Brass started it up and almost instantly, the GPS activated, pinpointing the location of their hotel.

"That's convenient," said Brass.

"Looks like our lucky day," said Wisdom. "To the hotel, my X-Men!"

---

***SHIELD Helicarrier  
Positioned Over The Atlantic Ocean  
One Month Earlier***

A brand-new red Mustang streaked through the sky, flying at top speed. The wheels were rotated so they faced the bottom of the car, hovering on a magnetic propulsion system.

The flying car flew into the open hatch on the Helicarrier, touching down soundlessly. The driver-side door opened and a woman dressed in a blue and white SHIELD uniform with green hair and matching glasses stepped out.

The woman walked through the corridors of the SHIELD Helicarrier, left unobstructed on her path. Agents who saw her stood at attention, some moved out of her way. All of them wondered just what she was doing here.

She approached a door labeled DIRECTOR and pressed the call button. A gruff response came: {Who is it?}

"You know who it is, Colonel. Open the door."

There was a brief hesitation and then the door slid open, granting her access. She walked up to Nick Fury, who sat behind his desk, a cigar between his teeth. She stood at attention and saluted.

"Colonel Fury," she said. "Commander Abigail Brand, SHIELD Internal Affairs."

"At ease, Commander," said Fury. He motioned to the chair in front of his desk. "Sit."

"Thank you, sir," said Brand, taking her seat.

"You wanna tell me what this is all about?" asked Fury. "Not often we get a visit from IA up here. Especially not directly with me."

Brand reached into a pouch on her belt and pulled out a memory stick. She handed it to Fury and he plugged it into a USB port on his desk. A holographic image appeared above the desk, showing a man familiar to Fury.

"Wisdom, Peter Winston," said Brand. "Formerly of Black Air, Weird Happenings Organization, and the unsanctioned Excalibur. Assigned as commanding officer of Mutant Division Strike Team: X-Force, now disbanded. Current status: on leave."

"Your point?" asked Fury.

"Sources show Wisdom has been busy lately," said Brand. "He's been spotted in Seychelles and Genosha. There have been link-ups to the SHIELD database originating from Myanmar and most-recently, Thailand. I checked the roster, we have no agents currently assigned to either of those countries."

"Could be a hack," said Fury. "Wouldn't be the first time someone's tried to

get in.”

“No, this was different,” said Brand. “High-level access codes were used, the kind that can't be identified for security reasons. We were lucky we could even trace the origin point.”

“What info was accessed?”

“Again, we don't know,” said Brand. “The access codes allow for a history bypass, so we can't see what files were accessed. It's the kind of code used by deep cover agents.”

“I already told you, we don't *have* any agents in Myanmar or Thailand,” said Fury.

“Then unauthorized personnel are using high-security clearance to access sensitive data,” said Brand. “And your indifference to this tells me you know something.”

Fury pulled the cigar from his mouth and exhaled the smoke slowly. “Actually no, it doesn't. I didn't become Director of SHIELD by panicking whenever things go south. I keep my cool, Agent Brand. Even in the worst of situations. I'm going to look into this and I'm going to find the bastard, that much I can promise you.”

Brand sighed. “Colonel, may I be frank?”

“Go right ahead,” said Fury.

“There's something strange going on with Agent Wisdom,” said Brand. “First X-Force disbands, then he goes off on leave. And he takes his leave in Africa and Genosha of all places. Shortly after that, reports come from Genosha that a prisoner there by the name of Del Ruiz is missing. Genosha government blames it on the actions of a group called the Resistants, but we both know they don't have the stones for an op like this. And now, there's trouble in Myanmar and someone accessing SHIELD's database from Thailand. Meanwhile, a few agents are unaccounted for—not only Wisdom but also Agents North and Watanabe. North has a history of working with Wisdom, they've both been with X-Force since the beginning.”

“So what do you think?” asked Fury.

“I have a few theories,” said Brand. “None I'm willing to share at the moment, because I don't want to make any accusations.”

“Accusations?” Fury raised his eyebrow. “Who said anything about accusations?”

“I said I wasn't making any accusations.”

"But you think you may have to."

Brand paused before she said, "if it comes to that, then yes."

She stood from her seat and offered a salute. "Thank you for your time, Colonel."

"One question before you go," said Fury.

"Yes?"

"Someone accessing the SHIELD database wouldn't be enough to send IA a red flag," said Fury. "So I'm curious—what brought this on?"

Brand simply smiled. "We'll be in touch, Colonel."

---

### ***Siberia, Russia One Month Earlier***

Wisdom turned on the laptop and linked to the SHIELD central database via satellite. He entered in the access codes given to him by Fury, which alternated on a daily basis. Once inside, he accessed the search function and in the advanced search, he typed: ROMAN, NILES in the name field.

He lit a cigarette as the search worked. A few moments later, the search came back with a result. "We've got a hit," he said.

The rest of the team looked over his shoulder as he opened the file. The photo showed a man with reptilian skin and yellow eyes. "Ugly bastard, isn't he?" said Brass.

"And a genius at that," said Wisdom. "Not to mention old."

"He's been working with world governments on genetics since the thirties" said Maverick.

"A lot of his early work was the basis for Erksine's research," said Wisdom. He scrolled down to read more of the file. "But it looks like he fell out of America's graces during the Cold War. Wanted to push the limits of human experimentation. America said no, the Soviets said yes."

"He defected," said Maverick.

"How is any of this connected?" asked Dust.

"Good question, love," said Wisdom. "He pretty much vanished during the seventies. Means he either retired, died—"

"—or went underground," finished Maverick.

"What's our plan?" asked Dust.

"We get into this gulag and it's a scorched earth operation," said Wisdom. "I'm not too savvy on going full-throttle on this, but we don't seem to have much of a choice. Suran said Roman's organ harvesting is just to fund his other experiments, experiments that he performs for some very powerful friends."

"Pete, could I have a word?" asked Maverick.

"For you Davy old son, I'll let you have a paragraph," said Wisdom. He stood from the chair and looked at the rest of his team. "Get your gear ready to go. We move before dawn."

Wisdom and Maverick stepped out of the motel room. They stood outside beneath the cover, snow starting to come down. "What's up, Mav?" asked Wisdom.

"This is serious, Pete," said Maverick. "Going after Roman like this, I don't think we have the manpower."

"What do you suggest, then?" asked Wisdom.

"Call in some help," said Maverick. "Bishop, Shard, a strike team. We need heavy hitters and this group doesn't have it."

"No can do," said Wisdom. "For better or worse, we're on our own, mate. No back-up for us, we don't exist, got it?"

"I've got a bad feeling about this, Pete," said Maverick.

"I know, but we don't have a choice."

---

***Port Victoria  
Republic of Seychelles  
One Month Earlier***

Mystique sat off to the side smoking a cigarette as Prudence worked with a pair of pliers to pull spent bullets from Sabretooth's massive frame. Mystique still couldn't believe the nerve of Wisdom, bringing in Sabretooth without telling her. But of course, that was Pete all over, doing things his own way.

"So what have you found out?" asked Prudence, grunting as she dug at the shells.

"Easy!" growled Creed.

"Don't be such a baby," said Prudence. The shell came loose and hit the ground, the metal now stained crimson.

"Sentinel tech has been smuggled out of Genosha," said Mystique.

"What is this, some sort of build-yer-own-Sentinel mail-order thing?" asked Creed. He snarled. "OW!"

"Oh shut up," said Prudence.

"Yer lucky I'm so docile these days..."

"Yes, you certainly proved that today," said Mystique.

"Don't pull the morality card with me, frail—we both know they had it comin'."

"To answer your question, the parts smuggled out aren't enough to build a fully functional Sentinel at least not on their own," said Mystique.

"So why bother?" asked Prudence.

"Genetic scanners," said Mystique. "Without them, a Sentinel wouldn't be able to discern a human from a mutant."

"So? Who'd want those?" asked Creed.

"Are you that dense?" asked Mystique. "With those scanners, an anti-mutant government or organization could locate their prey with far greater ease."

"Not only anti-mutant, there's also the ones who view mutants as a natural resource to be exploited," said Prudence. "Like oil or diamonds, mutants are a valuable commodity depending on their powers."

"It's more than that, some Sentinel weapons systems and other parts are contained in shipments as well," said Mystique. "Astra is responsible for smuggling them out and now we know who's behind the whole operation."

"Tessa," said Prudence. "All available info says she's dead."

"Don't mean shit, I've been dead before," said Creed. "Dead don't stay dead in our world, frail."

"He's right," said Mystique. "It wouldn't be the first time someone we know has cheated death. But it's not only Tessa—did you see the masks those guards were wearing?"

"What about 'em?" asked Sabretooth.

"They're the same masks worn by guards at the Hellfire Club," said Mystique.

“And that Sentinel tech could only come from one place—Shaw Industries.”

“Shinobi Shaw...” said Prudence. “He and the Hellfire Club are behind this?”

“They are,” said Mystique. “And our first order of business is to go after him.”

---



*Magda Square*  
*Genosha*  
*One Month Earlier*

Shinobi Shaw stumbled into the hotel room as he followed the young woman inside. The clothes she wore left little to the imagination—a skirt that would reveal everything if she bent over in the slightest and a top secured by nothing more than a strap around her neck.

**Pete Wisdom**



He clumsily wrapped his hands around her waist and began kissing her neck. The woman made no effort to disguise the disgust on her face. She pulled away and the smile reappeared.

“Hold on, baby—I’ve got a surprise for you,” she said.

“A surprise, huh?” asked Shaw. “I *like* surprises.”

**Maverick**



“Then you’ll love this one,” she said with a grin. She gently ran a finger up his chest and under his chin as she backed away. “Don’t go anywhere, I’ll be back in a flash.”

“Don’t take too long, baby,” said Shaw. The girl winked at him and Shinobi smiled. A massive hand suddenly wrapped around his mouth and he was pulled back forcefully, his head striking the broad chest of a man who was almost twice his size. Shinobi could feel hot breath on his neck and he glanced down, noticing the razor-sharp claws on the hairy fingertips of his captor.

**Brass**



“Do you want me, baby?” asked Victor Creed in a low growl.

Shinobi activated his mutant power, phasing through Sabretooth’s hand and he turned around to face the vicious killer. “You really think that will work on me, Sabretooth?”

“*No, but this might,*” said a voice in his head. Shinobi lost control of his body and his limbs froze, his body solidifying.

**Weapon X**



The woman circled back around, her skin changing to an indigo tone, her blond hair becoming crimson and her eyes were bright yellow. “Mystique... what the hell are you doing?” asked Shaw.

“I’m the one asking the questions here,” said Mystique. “Right now, there are two people sharing your body. One, I’m sad to say, is you. The other is Prudence Leighton. She has the ability to jump between bodies and take over them. That’s why your powers won’t work—she’s not allowing them.”

**Dust**



“Can I start playin’ doctor?” asked Sabretooth.

“Down, Victor,” said Mystique. “I get to go first.”

“What is this, good cop, bad cop?” asked Shaw.

“Not quite,” said Mystique. “This is terrorist and sociopath. One will torture and kill you, the other will torture, maim, and possibly eat you.”

**Mystique**

Sabretooth leaned closer to Mystique and whispered in her ear. “Hey, can you lay off the whole Hannibal Lecter thing? I ain’t like that anymore. Human meat... it don’t taste that good.”



**Prudence  
Leighton**

Mystique shot Creed a glare. “Will you shut up? Intimidation doesn't work so well if we don't present a united front.”

“Just sayin'... I'll torture him an' I'll do it for hours—days if you like,” said Sabretooth. “But cannibalism? That's crossing a line.”



**Sabretooth**

“I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think I liked you better when you were insane,” said Mystique. She stepped closer to Shinobi. “Okay Shaw, here's the deal—you're going to tell us everything you know about the tech you've been moving on the black market. And in return, we won't tell Magneto about your extracurricular activities.”

If Shinobi Shaw could control his facial muscles, a look of abject surprise would be all over his visage. “What are you talking about, Darkholme?”

“The Sentinel technology you've been moving on the black market,” said Mystique.



**Abigail  
Brand**

“You're insane, Shaw Industries isn't involved in that anymore,” said Shinobi.

“Yeah right, an' I'm Britney Spears,” said Creed.

“A skirt would definitely enhance some of your features,” said Shaw.



**Niles  
Roman**

Creed advanced on him, grabbing Shinobi by the collar of his shirt and pulling him close. “You really wanna test me, rich boy?”

“I'm telling you the truth!” said Shaw. “I have no idea what you're talking about! I've never sold any Sentinel tech! One of the first things I did after my father died was discontinue Sentinel production!”

“What about the stockpiles?” asked Mystique.

“Locked up in a warehouse, I don't know,” said Shaw.

“Then maybe you can tell us why Tessa, Astra and HFC guards were moving it through Port Victoria?”

“Tessa?” asked Shaw. He started to laugh. “Tessa's dead, Raven.”

“Not anymore.”

“...no, you're wrong,” said Shaw. “Look, if Tessa somehow survived Cable's rampage, I haven't heard anything about it. But I'm telling you, I have nothing to do with any of this.”

“Prudence, what do you think?” asked Mystique.

Shinobi spoke again, but this time Prudence was controlling what he said. “He's telling the truth, Mystique. He really doesn't know anything about this.”

“Then we've got bigger problems,” said Mystique. “Come on, we have to get moving.”

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents



**ASK DNA  
Part Five**

By [Dino Pollard](#)

---

*SHIELD Office of Internal Affairs  
New York City*

A message box appeared on Agent Abigail Brand's computer monitor. The return path was encrypted, so she ran it through the usual filters and scans and they determined the message was safe.

Brand opened the message and there was a file labeled INTERPOL. The image was of a Thai man and the status read as undercover. "What the hell is this?" asked Brand.

Another file was attached to the message. This was a video recording. Suran was tied up as a man dressed from head-to-toe in black leather beat down on him. The scene changed until it was just Suran and one man who wore a white dress shirt and black slacks. "Image recognition, identify all subjects in this file," she said.

The computer responded to her vocal command. Within a few moments, five SHIELD files appeared on her screen.

[IDENT: David North. KNOWN ALIASES: Maverick, Christoph Nord. STATUS: Agent. UPDATES: Currently inactive, whereabouts unknown.]

[IDENT: Sean Watanabe. KNOWN ALIASES: Brass. STATUS: Agent. UPDATES: Currently inactive, whereabouts unknown.]

[IDENT: Sooraya Qadar. KNOWN ALIASES: Dust. STATUS: Fugitive. UPDATES: Incarcerated.]

[IDENT: Brandon (NO KNOWN LAST NAME). KNOWN ALIASES: Weapon X. STATUS: Civilian, vigilante. UPDATES: Last seen with Mutant Underground Support Engine, whereabouts unknown.]

[IDENT: Peter Wisdom. KNOWN ALIASES: See attached file. STATUS: Agent. UPDATES:

Currently on bereavement leave, whereabouts unknown.]

“X-Force is gone, huh Fury?” asked Brand. She picked up her phone. “This is Agent Brand. Get me Interpol immediately.”

As she waited for the connection, she checked the return path again and tried to decrypt it. The computer returned no results. “High-level encryption...” she muttered. “Well, whoever you are, you’ve got access to some heavy tech.”

---

### *Siberia, Russia*

{We in place?}

“Just about,” said Maverick into his ear piece.

{Good, let’s bring on the noise,} said Wisdom.

Maverick hefted the rocket launcher, catching the gulag in his sights. Dust watched him curiously.

“Where did you get that?” she asked.

“I’ve got an old friend who lives in the area, he let me borrow it,” said Maverick. “Actually, I assume I can keep it. He still owes me for a poker game.”

North pulled the trigger and the rocket fired, shooting towards the side of the gulag. It blew a hole in the building and he readied himself for another shot.

“Get moving,” he said.

Dust changed her form into sand and blew towards the flames as Maverick fired another rocket. With no more left, he threw the launcher to the ground and drew a pair of Glocks, making his way down to what would be a battle as well.

---

{You’re up, Brass.}

“Roger that,” said Brass. He looked at Weapon X, who sat beside him in the jeep. “You ready?”

His teammate simply nodded and Brass turned his attention back to the road. “Good, then let’s get this over with.”

Brass stepped on the gas pedal, the car accelerating faster. Both he and Weapon X removed their seatbelts and wrapped their fingers around the door handles. As they approached closer and closer, they began to get anxious.

“Wait for it...” said Brass.

Guards started to emerge from the hole Maverick created and Brass and Weapon X leaped from the vehicle just as the jeep collided with them. The two men both tucked and rolled on the ground and sprung up. Brass reached behind his back, drawing a katana blade. His other hand drew an uzi and he went to work, firing and slashing at the guards as they approached. He activated his psionic abilities, masking his presence from the guards, effectively making him invisible as he moved through them.

Although he was able to do the same, the masked assassin chose a more direct route. Weapon X's forcefield instantly surrounded his body. It extended as a lance, spearing three guards caught in its wake, then flattened to a large ax he could swing.

Sand swirled around and worked its way on the guards as well, burrowing into their uniforms, cutting their skin. Dust's own contribution to the fight.

Maverick came into the battle behind the others, unloading with both Glocks on the guards.

{You got the distraction handled?}

"I think they're sending most of their firepower after us, you should be golden," said Maverick.

---

"Good," said Wisdom as he moved through the air ducts. "Weapon X, get me the info I need."

The response came as Weapon X downloaded the layout of the gulag from the various guards and them uploaded that information to Wisdom's brain. "Good work," he said.

Wisdom moved carefully through, now knowing the entire layout as if he had spent the past several years walking it himself. However, walking through the corridors and crawling through the air ducts were two different things, so it still proved somewhat challenging.

Wisdom turned at several junctions before he found himself above a laboratory. Seated in a wheelchair before a monitor was his target, a man with reptilian skin and glowing, yellow eyes. Wisdom's index finger grew longer, forming a point with the tip burning hotly. He used his finger as a cutting torch to open the vent and he dropped down behind his prey.

"Niles Roman, I presume," said Wisdom.

"You must be Peter Wisdom," said Roman, turning to face the mutant spy. "I've heard a lot about you. And you've been causing me some difficulty lately."

"It's what I do best, mate," said Wisdom. "We're shutting you down."

"Isn't that nice," said Roman. He turned his chair and faced the monitor again. Wisdom was taken aback by Roman's nonchalance.

"Hey... weren't you listening?" asked Wisdom. "I said I'm shutting you down."

"I know, I heard you," said Roman. "Now let's see... if I can get this out in time... tell me, what do you know about bribing customs officers in Japan? More or less expensive than America?"

Wisdom came closer, a hot knife resting by the side of Roman's neck. "Usually, this is the point

where the bad guy starts to piss himself. But you're not doing that, which is really throwing me off my game.”

“I'm not doing that because I don't care to fight you, Mr. Wisdom,” said Roman. “And your idle threats mean nothing to me. You've already signed your own death warrant.”

“Just what the hell are you talking about?” asked Wisdom.

“The organ harvesting, the Sentinel technology... it's all connected, you see,” said Roman. “But you didn't see those threads, did you? Nor could you see the puppet master controlling it all.”

“The bloody hell are you talking about?”

“Go ahead and kill me if it makes you feel like a big hero, but it won't stop my research,” said Roman. “I'm just a cog in the machine, and the gears have been turning for years now. And with our new benefactor, we've been able to move the project into high gear.”

Roman looked over shoulder, offering a sly grin. “Did you really think you caught us by surprise, Wisdom? We've been onto you since Myanmar. We knew X-Force was back in operation and we know all about your little deal with Fury. It's one that you will both live to regret.

“You see, you had it all wrong. You thought we were Cold War relics, moving into the black market. But the truth is that we're not. Not anymore. We're larger than you, Wisdom. Even if you tried to bring the full might of SHIELD down on us, it wouldn't work—we're far too well-connected. The demise of the Byron Agency has left the field of weapons development wide open, including the development of advanced infantry.”

“Advanced infantry?” asked Wisdom.

“Utilizing Sentinel technology, mutant organ harvesting, they're all for the express purpose of creating advanced super soldiers, far greater than Erksine could ever dreamed,” said Roman. “We find mutants in countries where the laws are lax, harvest them and use them as research subjects.”

“You've just come back into the cold, Mr. Wisdom,” said Roman. “And here we don't take lightly to trespassers.”

{Pete... I know you said we need radio silence, but we've got a problem. }

“Not now, Mav,” said Wisdom.

{No, now—}

Maverick's message was scrambled and Wisdom heard white noise. “Maverick? Mav? What's going on out there?”

A different voice responded, a feminine voice that Wisdom had never heard before today.

{Peter Wisdom, this is Agent Abigail Brand of SHIELD Internal Affairs. We have the compound surrounded. You and your operatives are under arrest for a laundry list of offenses. }

“Welcome to the future, Pete,” said Roman.

---

**NEXT:** *Cold War*

---



**Siberia**  
**One Month Earlier**

Niles Roman had a large grin on his face. "What's that, Mr. Wisdom? No witty repartee?"

**Pete Wisdom**

"Maybe it's because I already knew you were working with Interpol," said Wisdom. "Your boy Suran told me all about it. I just needed to know what exactly you were doing with those organs. And now that I found that out, while the rest of my team has been gathering evidence on Sentinel tech, things are finally coming full circle."



"...you didn't know," said Roman. "There's no possible way you knew."

**Maverick**

"That Suran was your liason to Interpol? Oh, I know all about it," said Wisdom. "In a recent study, nine out of ten nuns agreed that I can be quite persuasive."



"So what now?" asked Roman. "Do we have a battle here while your teammates are outside fighting their own organization?"

**Brass**

"Not quite," said Wisdom. "You see, I'm not interested in all this. You're nothing but a small fish in a much bigger pond. I'm after the great white whale, and you're nothing more than a minnow. All you've done is given me more ammo to use against these bastards, and I'm going to bring this operation down around their heads."



"Do you really think SHIELD is going to let you out of here alive?" asked Roman. "You are going down, Wisdom. And today is the day."

**Weapon X**

"No, actually it's not," said Wisdom. "I'm a resourceful man, Niles old son. And I've got a contingency plan for everything."



"Hah!" Roman chuckled. "Mr. Wisdom, short of vanishing into thin air, there is no possible escape for you."

**Dust**

"Funny you should mention that." Wisdom cracked a smile. "You see, that's exactly how we're getting out of here. But not before I tie up a loose end here."



**Mystique**

"And what loose end would that be?"

"This." Wisdom raised his finger and a hot knife shot from his tip, firing right through Roman's forehead, killing him instantly. "You may be small game, but that doesn't mean I'm going to leave you around to continue pulling this shit. You've cheated death enough already, Niles."

Wisdom tapped his earpiece. "It's Pete. We ready for that cover fire?"



**Prudence  
Leighton**

{I'm cruising in right now.}

"That's my girl," said Wisdom. He switched channels. "How about you, Charlie? You in position?"

{Once I get the go-ahead from the Major, I come in blasting.}



**Sabretooth**

"Good lad." Once more he switched channels. "X-Force, prepare for extraction."

{What are you talking about, Pete? Where the hell are you, we're on our last legs here!}

"Relax Mav, everything's going according to plan." He placed a memory stick into Roman's computer, downloading the files. Once the download was complete, he removed it and placed it in a case which he swallowed. "I'll meet you lot at the front door."



**Nick Fury**

---

**Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents**



**Abigail  
Brand**



**COLD WAR  
Part One**

By [Dino Pollard](#)



**Niles  
Roman**

---

"According to plan? This is a total cluster—"

The words died in Maverick's mouth as a Kamov Ka-52 helicopter gunship flew overhead, laying down fire on the SHIELD agents. X-Force drew off to the side as the gunship went to work, providing a distraction for SHIELD.

A portal appeared and a man dressed in armor emerged from it, laying down some other fire before he turned to X-Force. "Hurry, get in!"

"Who are you?" asked Brass.

"Introductions later, mate," said Wisdom, emerging from the facility.

"Valentina can't hold those agents off forever, so get moving!"

Wisdom leapt into the portal first, followed by Maverick, Dust, Brass and Weapon X. The armored man took one last look up at the sky and saw the gunship beginning to veer off-course into retreat. He followed X-Force into the portal and it closed behind him.

When X-Force emerged from the portal, they found themselves in a bunker of some sort. The entire team turned to Wisdom and Maverick was the one who broke the silence. "Just what is going on here, Pete?"

"Right then, full disclosure time, eh?" asked Pete. "Everyone, meet Charles Little Sky, or Portal as he likes to be called. Charlie, this is Maverick, Brass, Dust and Weapon X."

"Nice to meet you all," said Portal.

"Who is he?" asked Brass.

"A mutant, like us. On loan from MUSE," said Pete. "Figured we'd need a hand getting out of a hot spot, so I dropped our contact there a line."

"And the gunship?" asked Maverick. "That was a Kamov Ka-52. Those aren't even in mass-production yet."

"Charlie, make sure Valentina gets back here safe, right?" asked Wisdom. Portal nodded and vanished into his namesake. Pete lit a cigarette and took a seat. "Everyone relax, we've got to wait for Charlie and Val to get back before I go into the details."

"You've been keeping things from us, haven't you?" asked Dust.

"To be frank, yes," said Wisdom. "This is a war that's been fought on multiple fronts and each front only knew of their own mission and that I was the one calling the shots. Now, it's time to pull back the curtain and say hello to the wizard."

A portal opened and Little Sky stepped out with a Russian woman dressed in military fatigues who had short, dark hair. She smiled when she saw Pete. "Good to see you're still alive," she spoke with her accent.

"You too, love. Any trouble getting out?"

"I had to abandon the Kamov," she said. "By the way, Colonel Vazhin wanted me to tell you you're welcome and you owe him a new gunship."

"Tell Alexei we're even after that little episode in '95," said Wisdom.

"Now that we're all here, can we begin with the disclosure?" asked Maverick.

"Right you are, Davey," said Wisdom, sitting down as he exhaled smoke. "Like I said, we've been operating on three fronts. After Burma, we knew Sentinel tech was being sold on the black market. I sent Charlie over here to Russia to meet with Major Valentina Rychenko and had the two of them monitor that aspect of it."

"Except no Sentinel technology was missing, none that we could find," said Valentina.

"So I also had another agent of ours in Genosha keep an eye on things down there—Mystique."

"So we're working with terrorists?" asked Brass.

"Not up on current events, are you?" asked Maverick. "Mystique has been working with SHIELD for a while."

"Right, so I had Mystique investigate as well as two other agents in Africa—Prudence Leighton, whom you've all met and..."

Wisdom paused as he looked at Maverick. "What?" asked the German spy. "Why are you looking at me?"

"The other agent is Victor Creed."

"Jesus Christ, Wisdom..." muttered Maverick.

"He's under control."

"That's what everyone says before he snaps and starts tearing out entrails."

"Anyway, let's continue," said Wisdom. "The three of them discovered Sentinel tech was indeed being smuggled out of Genosha, although I haven't heard back from them yet, so I don't know what they've discovered."

"And then there's us," said Dust.

"It wasn't chance that we stumbled on Roman's operation, I knew the area he operated in and that was going to be our next mission. Weapon X discovered something going on before I had the chance, though. And when I cornered Suran and interrogated him, he told me what was really going on—or at least a part of it."

"Which is?" asked Brass.

"Mutant organ harvesting is just one small part of Roman's operation. Suran is an Interpol agent."

"Undercover?"

"Liason."

"So you're saying Interpol is working with Roman?" asked Brass.

"Something like that, yeah," said Wisdom. "This is all connected to genetic warfare. Bio-engineered super soldiers infusing a combination of Sentinel technology with mutant organs. We have to stop this now or else we're going to have a brand new Cold War on our hands."

"What about SHIELD?" asked Brass. "Am I to assume we're going rogue?"

"Someone tipped off Internal Affairs to our existence," said Wisdom. "And given that a lot of countries are working with Roman, that means the heat is on."

"Who would have tipped them off?" asked Maverick.

"Burma seems like the most-likely suspect," said Wisdom.

"So what do we do about Roman now?" asked Brass.

"Nothing, I killed him. Our concern now is getting to the heart of this matter and taking out the big dog."

"And who might that be?" asked Dust.

"The Hellfire Club."

The group looked at the door. Mystique stood there with Prudence by her side and Sabretooth towering behind the pair. "We found Tessa and Astra at the drop site along with HFC guards."

"Shaw?" asked Wisdom.

"I think they're working alone," said Mystique. "We interrogated Shinobi, he knows nothing of this."

"You're sure he wasn't lying?" asked Dust.

"Positive," said Prudence. "If he lied, I would have known about it."

"So what do we do now?" asked Valentina.

"Osaka," said Mystique. "We found out that the parts are shipped there first before being distributed across the world as—get this—prosthetics."

"Okay, here's our plan," said Wisdom. "Val, I want you to stay here, talk with Vazhin, see what sort of ins you can get us with Interpol. And have Vazhin contact Fury, let him know the story. Charlie, get back to MUSE, keep Fixx in the loop on this. We may need back-up. Pru, I want you back in Seychelles,

keep an eye on things in Port Victoria, see what you can do about blocking any other shipments from Genosha."

"And what about me and Raven?" asked Sabretooth.

"You two are with us, we're going to Japan," said Wisdom. "Once we're there, we split off. Raven and Dust, you two are with me, there's a contact there we have to meet with. Mav, you take Creed, Brass and Weapon X and you find out where Tessa and Astra are hiding out."

"Everyone understand their job?" he asked. Nods of approval followed. "Good. Charlie, if you'd be so kind...?"

---

### ***SHIELD Helicarrier Three Weeks Ago***

Commander Abigail Brand stormed into Fury's office, overriding the access code to the door. Fury immediately rose from behind his desk, his face contorted with rage. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"My job, something you might want to consider, Colonel," said Brand. She tossed a memory stick to Fury. He looked at it for a few moments then plugged it into his desk. A hologram appeared, showing the video from Brand's team and their recent battle with X-Force.

"You attacked SHIELD agents?" asked Fury.

"We gave them a chance to surrender and they refused," said Brand.

"You went over my head."

"I had to. You weren't being straight with me, but it gets better."

That was when the Kamov piloted by Valentina flew into the scene, laying down fire and allowing X-Force to make their escape. "We couldn't find a trace of them. The Kamov was abandoned a few clicks away with the pilot nowhere to be seen. They're working with a teleporter."

"Who is?" asked Fury.

"Don't play dumb with me, Fury. Your little covert mutant team."

"We've been over this, X-Force doesn't exist."

"On paper, maybe," said Brand. "Yet three of our agents and one incarcerated prisoner are unaccounted for. All four of them along with another masked operative have been identified in this video."

The video changed, this time to the interrogation of Suran in Thailand. "Recognition software positively identified all of them. Three of them are SHIELD agents, two of those agents have past associations with X-Force, one of them is our missing terrorist and the fourth is a mutant assassin who was part of the unsanctioned X-Force."

"What do you want for all this, a medal?" asked Fury.

"No, I want you to give me full disclosure."

"How about you tell me some things, Brand?" asked Fury. "Such as, why the hell were they at an abandoned gulag anyway? Who was this guy they were interrogating?"

"An investigation into the gulag has been blocked by the UN Security Council," said Brand. "As for the victim, his name's Suran, an undercover Interpol agent. Wisdom tortured him."

"Wisdom wouldn't torture an Interpol agent."

"But he would torture a suspect, wouldn't he?" asked Brand. "We can add violation of the Geneva Conventions to his list of crimes then, can't we?"

She handed Fury a piece of paper and he took it from her. "What's this?"

"That is a resolution adopted by the Security Council stating that I have full authority to use any and all SHIELD resources to bring in Wisdom and his accomplices," said Brand. "As of this moment, I am acting Director of SHIELD."

"You've gotta be shittin' me..."

"You've proven yourself unable to fulfill your duties, so this is the way it has to be," said Brand. "I'm sorry, Colonel. I'll be assembling a team to clean up your mess."

---

It took only a few short hours to assemble the team Brand planned to use against Wisdom. Two of them were not on assignment and the third had left SHIELD but Brand was able to convince her to return.

"I'd like to thank you for agreeing to meet with me. As you all know, this is a matter of dire global security and the UNSC has granted me full authority to act to bring this matter to justice."

On the monitor appeared the images of their targets. "Now, I know you recognize some of these targets and I understand the mixed emotions. However, they have crossed a line and we need to bring them in. I hope we can all be professionals about this."

"This is a dangerous game you're playing, Commander. None of these are lightweights. They could cause significant trouble."

"I understand that. But I also know that you are well-qualified and you wouldn't shirk your duties. Would you, Agent Bishop?"

The former X-Man shook his head. "No ma'am, I will not."

"Agent Shard, Agent Rourke, have you anything to add?"

Shard shook her head. Theresa Rourke, however, felt the need to voice her opinion. "I wanna be clear on one thing, Brand. I'm doing this because Pete and David are me friends, understand? An' the last thing I wanna do is see them gunned down by your agents."

"Whatever gets you on my team, Agent," said Brand. "I have a contact within Wisdom's unit who has informed me they're in Osaka. I've spoken to the Japanese government and one of their heroes will assist you in the capture."

"You have someone inside X-Force?" asked Shard. "Who is it?"

"I'm not at liberty to say at the moment," said Brand.

"We need to know who's on our side, Commander," said Bishop.

"No, you don't. Just bring them all in alive and I'll take it from there."

"An' who are we meeting?" asked Siryn.

"Shiro Yoshida. Goes by the name Sunfire."

"Perfect..." muttered Bishop.

---



**Pete  
Wisdom**

**Osaka  
One Week Ago**

The common term for places like this is a hostess bar or snack bar. Places where lonely businessmen can spend several thousand yen an hour in order to talk to beautiful young women. Some are simply places for conversation but others, like this one, are prostitution fronts run by Yakuza clans.



**Maverick**

The British expatriate who sat with beautiful young Japanese women on either side seemed perfectly at home here. He held a glass with Suntory whiskey in one hand, the ice rattling around with each sip. His other arm was draped around one of the women.

"I think we need another round here," he said in perfect Japanese. "Also, I seem to be out of Silk Cuts. Anyone got a cigarette I can borrow?"



**Brass**

The girl his arm was draped around reached for a pack of Mild Sevens on the table. She placed it between his lips and lit it for him.

"You, my dear, are too kind," he said.

She smiled and placed her hand on his upper thigh. "I can be even kinder."



**Weapon X**

"Wouldn't that be something," he said. "I love Japan, the people are so...accommodating."

"We like Englishmen here," said the one who sat on his other side, rubbing his chest.

"I can see that," he said.



**Dust**

"What is your work?"

"Well, if you must know, I'm a spy."

"Like James Bond?"

He winked at her. "Better. The name's Wisdom. Pete Wisdom."



**Mystique**

*{This is growing pretty tiresome.}*

"Just relax, love," said Wisdom as he wrapped his arms around both girls, pulling them tight and acting as if he was speaking to them. "This night is going perfectly well."

"Have you been to Japan before?" asked one of the girls.

"Been a few years but yeah," he said. "But I came here because I thought a



**Sabretooth**

mate of mine died. Then it turns out he had just disappeared for a spell. Now, I find out he's back and I came to surprise him."

"Oh really?"

"Gospel truth, love."

"So where is your friend tonight?"

"I've been here for two weeks, haven't had much luck tracking him down yet," said Wisdom. "I know he comes to places like this a lot, so I thought I might run into him." He paused for a moment to take a sip of his whiskey and a drag on his cigarette. "Say, maybe one of you knows him? Not the most social guy. His name's Ken. Ken Harada."

**Silver Samurai**



**Nick Fury**

The girls both pulled away, their expressions betraying their words. "I—I don't know anyone named Harada."

"Somehow, I don't believe you," said Wisdom. He drew on the cigarette again and blew out a few tiny smoke rings. "I want you to tell him Pete Wisdom came to leave some flowers at his grave before he found out the sod's back among the living."

"B-but we don't know him."

Wisdom sighed. "Right. Then find someone who *does*. Now get moving." He raised his finger and it began to glow white-hot and elongate. "Don't make me ask twice."

The girls both scampered off into the back room. Wisdom sat back against the couch, sipping his whiskey and smoking his cigarette. He watched as the other girls began to shoo the customers towards the door, telling them they should go outside for air. Soon, the place was empty save for the bartender, who ducked down.

"Very interesting," said Wisdom.

The door to the back room opened and a tall, imposing Japanese man stepped out, clutching a katana blade that crackled with energy. "Wisdom."

"Hello there, Kenuchio," said Wisdom. "You get a chance at reincarnation and you decide to return to *that* ugly sack of skin?"

"You have five seconds to explain yourself before I relieve your neck of the burden your head places on it."

**\*CHK\***

"I think not," said Wisdom. A featureless black figure dropped from the ceiling, pointing a gun at Harada's head. The figure's form shifted,

transforming into a woman with indigo skin, burgundy hair, yellow eyes and a white leather jumpsuit. "I believe you know Mystique."

Wisdom stood and a cloud seemed to fly off him, forming into a young woman wearing a burka. "And this is Dust."

"What do you want?" asked Harada.

"Information," said Wisdom.

---

**Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents**



**COLD WAR  
Part Two**

By [Dino Pollard](#)

---

***The Triskelion  
Today***

"Japan?" asked Fury.

"Yeah, we found out that the Hellfire Club was shipping the Sentinel materials from Africa to Osaka, before being smuggled into other countries as prosthetics" said Wisdom.

"And the Silver Samurai?"

"After that business between the X-Men and Deus, dead mutants all over the world started popping up."

"Except Harada was killed long before the Hecatomb."

"Even ones who weren't killed in the Hecatomb were resurrected. Strange thing is it didn't seem to matter if they had been buried or cremated, didn't matter how they died, just seemed to resurrect anyone the wave chose. If you ask me, seems like there's something mystical there as well."

"Since when do you believe in magic?" asked Fury.

"I saw some really fucked up things when I was with Excalibur, mate."

"How did you know Harada was one of the resurrected?"

"Heard a rumor, know a guy who knows a guy whose brother worked for the Clan Yashida when Harada turned up to take back control," said Wisdom.

"Sounds like very reliable intel."

"Obviously it was."

"But still, why Harada?" asked Fury.

"Even despite Harada and Mariko's efforts to clean it up, the Clan's still got underworld ties. Mariko tried to sever them completely but Harada understood the need to keep some things intact. And for the kind of smuggling operation the HFC was doing, they'd need some help in Japan. And with Psylocke in charge of both the Hand and the Jigoku, they knew they were up shit creek there. So they needed to go through the traditional Yakuza routes. Which, under normal circumstances, the Samurai would have picked up on."

"Except they didn't know he was alive."

"He did a good job of keeping his tracks covered, the HFC had no idea, didn't even suspect," said Wisdom. "He's been spending the time he's been back secretly rejoining the Clan Yashida, taking it back piece by piece. I bet not even SHIELD knew about it, right?"

Fury said nothing.

"That's what I thought. For all the HFC's money and even with SHIELD's global reach and all those fancy toys you've got, nothing turns up more reliable intelligence than good old fashioned assets."

"So you, Mystique and Dust made contact with the Samurai," said Fury. "What about Sabretooth, Maverick, Brass and Weapon X?"

"They were doing their job, tracking down Tessa and Astra. And they were doing it in their...unique way."

---

### ***Osaka One Week Ago***

A beautiful day out, the sun was shining, the birds were singing, it seemed like nothing could go wrong.

Until, of course, a Japanese man went flying out the top floor window of a corporate boardroom, plummeting to the streets below and his eventual death.

Up in the boardroom itself, a large, burly man with straggly blond hair, fangs, and razor-sharp claws took the seat of the man he just threw out—literally. He wore a tank-top and jeans and rested his massive feet, clad in heavy work boots, on the table.

“So...does anyone *else* take issue with my presence on the floor?” he asked. His Japanese was gruff, but otherwise very good. Not one of the men seated around the table offered a single objection and Victor Creed smiled. “Good to know. Brass?”

Sean Watanabe began speaking in his native tongue. “We don't wish to harm any of you. As long as you cooperate, you will not be injured. Now, are you going to cooperate?”

Nods in the affirmative followed and Brass smiled. “Smart. We're looking for a woman your company has a connection to. A woman named Tessa. She represents an organization known as the Hellfire Club. Do you know who we're talking about?”

No answers came.

“An uncomfortable silence,” said Sabretooth, still in Japanese. He stood from his seat and began to circle the table. “I'm not real big on uncomfortable silences. See, uncomfortable silences make me...well, uncomfortable. Never been big with words, so if someone's not talkin', I feel the need to fill that silence with something else.”

He stopped behind one of the men. His massive hands gripped the poor executive by his shoulders and threw him on the table. Sabretooth leapt on top of him and uttered a loud growl, like that of a lion, causing the man to freeze in terror. He ran the back of his claw along the man's face.

“Tell me somethin', pal,” he said. “You ever been ass-raped by way of an office chair?”

The man's eyes widened in horror.

“Creed, we've got what we came for,” said Brass, switching to English.

“What? Already?” asked Sabretooth. He looked down at the man. “Dammit...was gonna get me an ear, too.”

The four men left the office and walked out into the hallway as Brass explained the situation. “Once Creed started threatening them, their thoughts of Tessa were loud enough for both Weapon X and I to pick up with our telepathy.”

"So where are we going?" asked Maverick.

Brass pressed the call button for the elevator. "A Yakuza boss has a house just outside of town. That's probably where she's holed up."

---

### ***The Triskelion Today***

"So you put a bloodthirsty sociopath on a SHIELD mission."

"You said I could pick my own team, Fury," said Wisdom.

"Yeah, as long as I know who's on it!"

Wisdom lit a fresh Pall Mall. "Need-to-know basis, Nicky. Creed was very effective in getting us the intelligence we need. That company was helping the HFC smuggle the Sentinel parts as prosthetics. Neither Brass nor Weapon X is powerful enough to dig through people's minds effectively. We needed to put those men in a situation where their thoughts would basically broadcast themselves."

"And in the process, he killed a man to do it," said Fury.

"We do what we have to," said Wisdom. "If it makes you feel any better, that was the man in charge of this company's connections to Tessa. Unfortunately, SHIELD had to go and make our lives even more difficult."

"Team X wasn't my idea."

"No, but you put us in that situation," said Wisdom.

"The problem, Wisdom, came with your team. You were betrayed by one of the people you thought would be a good recruit," said Fury. "Or did you conveniently forget that part?"

Wisdom narrowed his eyes. "What the bloody hell do you think?"

---

### ***Osaka One Week Ago***

"How did you know?" asked Harada.

The Silver Samurai sat with Wisdom, Mystique and Dust at a low table only about a foot off the ground. They all knelt down on the floor of the tatami mat room. On the table before them was a bottle of warm sake and each of them held a small glass. One of the girls from Harada's snack bar filled the

glasses.

"Just lucky, I guess," said Wisdom. "But once I found out you were also part of the great escape from the netherworld, I had a feeling you could help us out as well."

"And how would that be?" asked Harada.

"The Hellfire Club," said Mystique. "They're smuggling Sentinel technology—weapon systems, gene scanners, things of that nature—from Genosha. It's found its way to the black market."

"And it's going to people who shouldn't have it," said Wisdom. "We encountered it in Burma."

"Hardly fills me with confidence," said Harada. "But what do you expect me to do about it?"

"They're bringing it through Japan, so that means they've got Yakuza help," said Wisdom. "And as I'm sure you've discovered, this is something the Hand wouldn't take part in."

"Correct," said Harada. "A lot's changed since my death."

"We know Tessa's behind it, but we also know she traditionally doesn't work alone," said Mystique. "But Shaw isn't involved. This doesn't serve his interests."

"Are you certain of that?" asked Harada. "This strikes me as the sort of scheme that has Shaw's name written all over it."

"We already checked him, he's clean," said Mystique.

Harada raised an eyebrow. "When?"

"What's that?"

"*When* did you check him?"

"An associate of ours took a trip through his mind a few weeks back in Genosha," said Wisdom. "Said he was telling the truth."

"That's not possible."

"We have him under watch, Kenny," said Wisdom. "I don't know what you've heard, but Shinobi Shaw hasn't left Geno—"

"Stop," said Harada, raising his hand. "You were speaking of *Shinobi* Shaw?"

"Who else?"

"I was speaking of his father."

"His father's dead," said Wisdom.

"Hmm, I wonder how he might have avoided that fate?" asked Harada.

"...oh bollocks..."

---

The Japanese-style house was large and opulent, with armed guards patrolling the grounds. Maverick, Brass, Sabretooth and Weapon X stood on a hilltop just outside the perimeter, watching and planning their move.

"We need to split up," said Maverick. "Brass, you and Sabretooth go in through the front. Cause a big enough distraction to make it easier for Weapon X and I to slip in unnoticed via the back way."

"Not to sound like a coward, but considering you've got more firepower and more offensive powers than me, shouldn't you be leading the charge through the front?" asked Brass.

"Believe me, I'd like nothing more," said Maverick. "But these are just hired thugs, nothing you probably couldn't handle alone. And each of us should have a telepath with us, plus Weapon X is more adept at stealth missions than you are."

"Don't sweat it, kid." Sabretooth slapped Brass on the back, almost knocking him over. "Ol' Uncle Vic'll take good care of you."

---

Brass hurled a grenade at the front entrance and the guards scattered just before it exploded. Sabretooth leapt into the fray and the guards opened fire. He moved with a speed belaying his massive size, the razor-sharp claws that adorned his fingertips shredding through the guards, cutting them to pieces.

Brass came in after, armed with his katana sword. Creed drew the majority of the gunfire, allowing Brass to move through virtually unmolested and take on the guards while their attention was diverted. As he moved, he relayed a telepathic message.

On the other side of the house, Weapon X received Brass' message. He motioned with his hand for Maverick to follow him and then took the lead, expanding the forcefield under his feet to boost him onto the roof of the house. Maverick fired a grapple line and followed him.

Weapon X leaned over the edge of the roof, reaching his hands out at a closed window. His forcefield extended from his fingertips and flattened, allowing it to slide beneath the window. It reached around inside and

unlocked it, and he pushed it open before jumping in. Maverick followed suit.

They found themselves in a tatami room. Swords, boken, staves, and other weapons adorned the walls. Before they took another step, Weapon X raised his hand to halt Maverick. The sliding doors opened and a man walked in, wearing the kimono of a samurai. His dark hair was even tied in the traditional knot. However, his features were distinctly European, as were the woman who stood by his side, her pale skin almost white and a sharp contrast to her black hair and the marks under her eyes.

"Good evening, we've been expecting you gentlemen," said the man. "Allow me to introduce myself—my name is Sebastian Shaw and this is my associate, Tessa."

Weapon X was about to launch into an attack but he found his body would not respond to his commands.

"That would be my doing," said Tessa. "The brain is a fairly advanced computer, one I can manipulate with relative ease. Especially one as primal as yours. You will find it's impossible for you to break out of that pose unless I allow you."

She smiled slightly. "Sebastian, this young man is wondering how we were ready for their arrival."

"Then perhaps we should tell him."

"Don't bother, Shaw," said Maverick, raising his Glock.

Shaw raised his eyebrow. "An interesting turn of events, Mr. Nord."

"This was the plan all along," said Maverick, keeping his eyes and gun trained on Shaw. "Send X-Force around the planet on a wild goose chase. Unfortunately for the Hellfire Club, we got wise to the game. So instead, you decided another tactic—turning SHIELD against us."

"We had some help on the inside," said Shaw.

"I know," said Maverick. "I'm sorry, but now it has to end."

He turned the gun from Shaw and pointed it at Weapon X. The young man called Brandon relayed a single thought to his supposed teammate. Maverick sighed. "Because there's nothing more pathetic than a soldier without a war."

**\*BLAM\***

---



**Berlin**  
**Some Time Ago**

Christoph Nord, also known as David North, entered his small apartment. He went to the kitchen and took a beer from the refrigerator, sitting down in a comfortable leather recliner in front of the small television.

**Pete Wisdom**



He reached under his leather jacket, drawing the Glock he kept hidden there and flicked the safety off. "You might as well come out, I know you're there."

"You're very good, Mr. Nord," said the woman who emerged from the shadows. Her black hair was pulled up in a bun, save for the straight bangs which framed her pale face. She was dressed all in leather, a bustier and matching pants with a trench coat over the entire ensemble. There were black marks, like tattoos or scars, under her eyes.

**Maverick**



"I don't remember arranging for female companionship tonight." Nord aimed the gun at her. "Tell me who you are and what you want or I'll put a bullet between those pretty eyes."

"I'm not here to fight you, Mr. Nord. On the contrary, I'm here to make you an offer."

**Brass**



"What kind of offer would that be?"

"My name is Tessa, I represent Sebastian Shaw."

"Shaw's dead," said Nord.

**Dust**



"These days, that's hardly a guarantee of anything," said Tessa. She motioned to a chair. "May I sit?"

"Assuming you're telling the truth, why would I want anything to do with Shaw?" asked Nord.

**Mystique**



"German hospitality at its finest." Tessa sat in the chair anyway, crossing her legs and laying her hands upon her knee. "How long have you been alive for, Christoph?"

"You can do the math," said Nord.

"You've been working in the intelligence community so long, I bet you can scarcely remember your life before it."

**Sabretooth**

"Memory implants have that effect," said Nord.

"And now what are you doing?" asked Tessa. "Ever since the end of the Cold War, you've been working as a freelance mercenary. Or at least you were,

before Fury and Wisdom got their claws into you. And now, what are you doing? What defines your life?"

"Helping others like me," said Nord.

"Not quite," said Tessa. "The problem with being a soldier, Christoph, is what happens once your war is over?"

**Silver Samurai**



Nord said nothing, but he relaxed the gun a little, resting his arm on the chair, although still keeping it fixed on his uninvited guest.

"You become a relic, a dinosaur. Slowly rotting away, dreaming of your glory days. Trying to discover where it all went wrong."

**Nick Fury**

"That's the nature of life."



"What if it didn't have to be?" asked Tessa. "What if I could give you a new war to fight? Think back to it, Christoph. The thrills, the danger—fighting terrorists just isn't the same as fighting a world superpower. You're a soldier without a war, and if you don't pick up that gun again, soon there won't be anything left of you. Fury can't give you that war, he's too busy trying to stop it from erupting once again. But Sebastian and myself, we can give your life a purpose once again. We can give you something to fight for."

**Abigail Brand**



Nord raised his gun and the clip slid free. He set the gun and the clip on the table beside him and stood. "Would you like a drink?"

Tessa smiled.

**Siryn**



**Bishop**

---

**Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents**



**COLD WAR  
Part Three**

By [Dino Pollard](#)

---

**Osaka**

## **One Week Ago**

"C'mon, you tattooed fucks!" shouted Sabretooth. "You're supposed to be Yakuza? My granny could take you apart, don't matter that she died a paraplegic!"

Razor-sharp bone claws opened stomachs and throats as Creed built up a body count. Off to the side, Brass watched and cursed himself for what felt like the umpteenth time for agreeing to be part of Wisdom's unit. The more he stayed with X-Force, the more he realized just how insane most of them were.

Brass tried to at least make any deaths he was responsible for quick and painless. But Sabretooth, he was an animal. Brass had heard that this infamous sociopath had supposedly reformed, but watching this scene, he found it hard to believe. Even if Creed was now fighting on the side of angels, he was still every bit the vicious monster Brass had been told he was. The only difference was now he had a badge to back him up and the thought of that was every bit as frightening.

Sean Watanabe was suddenly struck from behind by an energy blast. He quickly recovered, getting to his feet and spinning around. A black woman with blond hair and a blue and white SHIELD uniform stood, holding a gun in one hand and her other hand crackling with energy.

"Agent Watanabe, I order you to stand down," she said.

"And who are you?" asked Brass.

"Shard, Agent of SHIELD," she said. "Wisdom and his X-Force unit are unlawfully operating and abusing SHIELD resources. We're here to shut you down."

"That's not possible, Fury was completely aware of everything we were doing," said Brass.

"Then obviously, Wisdom's been spinning a good tale," said Shard. "I'll be happy to hear it once we're on a transport bound for the Helicarrier."

"And how do you expect to stop Sabretooth?" asked Brass.

"I don't," said Shard. The temperature suddenly increased to extremely high levels and Brass had to shield his eyes to protect them from the bright light of the flames.

A Japanese man surrounded by fire hovered onto the scene, facing down against Sabretooth. Brass just watched in shock as Sabretooth leapt at the flaming man and Shard smiled as her partner engulfed the mutant in flames.

"I expect Sunfire to do his part and take out Creed," she said.

---

"Tell me what you know about Shaw's operation," said Wisdom.

"He contacted me, told me he could use my aid in transporting some shipments into Japan, wanted me to set him up with some potential buyers," said Harada. "I told him to go to hell."

"Damn interesting, that is," said Wisdom, drawing a Silk Cut from his pack.

"Why weren't you smoking those before when you were with the girls?" asked Harada.

"What, and turn down a freebie?" Wisdom lit the cigarette. "You must be out of your mind."

"If you knew what Shaw was doing, why didn't you stop him?" asked Dust.

"I have no interest getting involved in those affairs," said Harada. "I have the Clan Yashida back under my power once more and most of my enemies still believe I'm dead. I'm content with my life, thank you."

"While your own kind suffers," said Dust.

"Those I care for are safe and that's all that matters to me."

"What else can you tell us about Shaw?" asked Wisdom.

"Nothing, I'm afraid. Shaw never divulged any pertinent details of his operation. Tonight, you've told me more than he has. I'm afraid there's not much more I can do for you."

"Dust, get Mystique off of security detail," said Wisdom. "Time we got moving, we need to rendezvous with the rest of the group."

Dust nodded, shifting to her sand form and flowing out the window. The Silver Samurai watched her leave and then turned his attention back to Wisdom. "Interesting company you keep these days."

"They come in handy when the time's right."

"Former terrorists," said Harada.

"They're out to protect mutants, so I don't give a toss what they were doing before this," said Wisdom. "Besides, sometimes you need to get your hands dirty."

"Have you considered the implications of your operation?" asked Harada. "The possible negative impact they will have for human/mutant relations or the impact they could have on Fury and SHIELD?"

Wisdom cocked an eyebrow. "Come again?"

"I said have you considered the impact this could have on SHIELD?" asked Harada. "This is potentially damning to their reputation with other nations."

"That's an interesting theory," said Wisdom. He moved his hands to his knees, or at least appeared to. In reality, he placed his palms on the table's underside and flipped it forward at Kenuchio Harada. Wisdom jumped back, his fingers elongating and glowing with extreme heat. The Silver Samurai drew his katana, holding it in a defensive stance.

"You died before I hooked up with SHIELD and I never mentioned them during our conversation," said Wisdom.

"Word gets around," said Harada.

"Except according to SHIELD's records, I'm unemployed and my unit doesn't exist," said Wisdom. "So answer this, Kenny-boy—how did you know I'm working for Nick Fury?"

"Because we told 'im, Pete."

Wisdom turned his head to the door at the sound of a sweet voice with a beautiful Irish brogue. "Oh bloody hell...what did you do to Mystique, Terry?"

Theresa Rourke-Cassidy, known as Siryn. Daughter of Sean Cassidy, the Banshee. Formerly of X-Force and formerly a friend of Wisdom's. Now, working with SHIELD to bring in her ex-leader.

"I didn't do anythin' to her," said Siryn.

"But *I* did."

Mystique's limp body landed on the floor in front of Wisdom. Team X's field commander made his entrance. A large, imposing man with a shaved head and an M tattooed over his right eye.

"Long time no see, Bishop," said Wisdom.

"Apparently, not long enough," said Bishop. He raised his gun and pointed it at Wisdom. "I'm giving you one chance to surrender. Don't make me shoot you."

Wisdom moved towards Mystique but Bishop cocked his gun. "I'm warning you."

"Take it easy, mate..." Wisdom stepped back, slowly raising his arms in surrender. He glared at the Silver Samurai. "So much for honor and all that bollocks, eh?"

"There's no honor in helping a fugitive," said Harada.

"Is that what they told you?" asked Wisdom.

"Prove us wrong, Pete," said Siryn. "Come with us quietly an' we'll sort all this out. It doesn't have tae be like this."

"Sorry Terry, wish there was another way," said Wisdom.

"By now, the rest of our team will have apprehended your teammates," said Bishop.

"One question," said Wisdom. "How'd you know where to hit us?"

Bishop kept the weapon trained on Wisdom's head. "Ask your friend."

---

### ***The Triskelion*** **Now**

"Maverick."

"Had no way of knowing."

"Sounds like he was the only one with the stones to go against you."

"North never gave reason for him to be doubted," said Wisdom. "Sure, we had some red flags. Brass was a big one and Dust's history made her a likely candidate. But Mav was with us at the beginning—you brought him onboard yourself, remember? The idea that I didn't do my homework is as much your burden as mine."

"Difference being, Maverick worked out for my purposes," said Fury. "He turned on you for SHIELD."

"No, he turned on me for his *real* boss," said Wisdom. "I told you what I found out."

"You did, and it's a damn interesting story you've spun, Pete." Fury leaned against the wall and lit a fresh cigar. "Interpol, mutant rights violations, black market Sentinel tech, and at the top of it all—Sebastian Shaw himself. A man who's supposed to be dead."

"We both know what's been happening to dead mutants."

"Cut the crap already, we've got you dead to rights and you know it."

"I'm not making this up, Fury," said Wisdom. "You know me and you know that I may be many things, but I'm not what you think I am."

"Wish I could believe you, Pete," said Fury. "But you can't prove a damn thing."

"You're right, I can't," said Wisdom. "Not yet, anyway. But I plan on finding out. Don't you think it's interesting that we're being investigated—that SHIELD's being investigated—once this intel turned up? Niles Roman and Interpol, working together in conjunction with who knows how many governments to create a new Super Soldier Program, using mutants. And Shaw is one of the men who benefits the most from it. So the question becomes who is pulling the strings?"

Fury chewed on the end of his cigar and just listened as Wisdom spun his tale.

"Think about it, Nick—the Americans wouldn't be working with Interpol on something like this. They're not satisfied unless they're the ones with the best—not too big on sharing. So that means this goes above them, this is something involving *your* bosses."

Wisdom lit a fresh cigarette and sucked on the tip. "The United Nations Security Council. They're in the early stages of a global Super Soldier Program."

Fury scoffed. "Black helicopter bullshit, Wisdom. Who's your source on that, David Icke?"

"We both know the psychology of men like North," said Wisdom. "Cold Warriors don't have much going for them in this world. Private security contractors, terrorism, it's not the same as the Americans and the Soviets crossing swords. A lot of them miss that old rush. Maverick's no different."

"Bullshit, it's not in Maverick's character to turn so easy."

"No, but he had a seed of it in his head. All he needed was some proper nudging," said Wisdom. "And that nudging was done by one of Shaw's people."

"Who would that be?"

"We saw Tessa in Seychelles, she's the most-likely candidate. Not a full-on telepath, but one who can help move things in one way or another. Without her manipulation, Maverick likely wouldn't have turned. But with her help, she pushed him against us. Promised him things, spun it in a way that he thought he was doing it for the greater good."

"Well because of you, I've got the Security Council breathing down my neck," said Fury. "You've violated all sorts of international treaties, not to mention basically spitting on the Geneva Conventions after what you did in Southeast Asia. So I'm ready to give Maverick a fuckin' medal after turning you in."

"No more X-Force, eh?" asked Wisdom.

"SHIELD is no longer in the business of mutant affairs. They feel after the embarrassment X-Force has been, we're doing more harm than good. Maybe the problem was bringing you on at all," said Fury. "Siryn's resigned, as per Brand's agreement with her, and the rest of Team X—including Maverick—have been reassigned to separate divisions."

"And mutant affairs?" asked Wisdom.

"The Security Council has drafted a resolution called the X-Factor Sanction. A global treaty for mutants. Under the resolution, a global organization has been set up to deal specifically with mutant rights in the world—X-Factor Sanction Enforcement."

"XSE, they sure love those letters. Bet Bishop and Shard thought it was a pip. And just who have they found to head this up?"

A knock came at the door and Fury walked towards it. "Here she is now."

Abigail Brand crossed from the doorway to Wisdom's chair, staring him down as she crossed her arms over her chest. "How are you feeling, Wisdom?"

"Truth be told, I've been better, love," said Wisdom. "How's it feel to be the new top dog?"

Brand smiled. "Pretty good, especially considering that under the X-Factor Sanction, you are no longer SHIELD's prisoner. You fall under XSE jurisdiction, which means your ass belongs to me."

Wisdom smiled. "Naughty."

She turned to Fury. "I need him bound and ready for transport in fifteen minutes."

Fury grumbled. "Please would be nice, Agent Brand."

Brand offered an arrogant smile. "That's *Director* Brand."

---

Wisdom boarded the transport, strapped into the back with Brand sitting across from him. The hatch closed behind him and the transport disengaged from the Triskelion, moving through the sea to the surface of the Atlantic.

"What did you do about Weapon X?" he asked.

"Did some digging, found out that he still has family in Canada. We'll see to it that his remains are transported to his family."

"They shouldn't know what he was turned into."

"They won't," said Brand.

"Never figured you for the sentimental type," said Wisdom.

Brand drew a pack of cigarettes from her belt and lighter. She placed one between Wisdom's lips and lit it for him. "I'm not. It's a security issue."

Wisdom reached his cuffed hands for the cigarette, removing it from his lips. "And the others?"

"Darkholme and Creed are held in custody given their backgrounds."

"At least until the XSE decides they need them."

"And Brass is on leave right now. We're thinking of bringing him into the XSE."

"He's a good soldier," said Wisdom. "What about Dust?"

Brand smiled. "Still unaccounted for. With her powers, she could be anywhere in the world by now, but our intelligence sources believe she'd go somewhere she can blend in."

"She's a clever girl," said Wisdom. He took another drag on the cigarette and smiled at his captor. "Thanks for getting my brand."

"Don't mention it." Brand looked out a small window and saw they were now airborne. "Looks like this is it."

Sand flowed out of the pouches on Brand's belt, coalescing onto the ground and then forming into a full figure. Brand stood and unlocked Wisdom's cuffs and the chains that bound his legs. Wisdom placed his hands on the hatch and looked at Brand.

"Any word from our contacts, Pru?"

When Brand spoke this time, it was with the voice of Prudence Leighton and a psychic fairy appeared in her forehead. "Fixx is monitoring us. Once we jump, Portal is standing by to catch us."

"You sure this is a good idea?" asked Dust.

"Definitely," said Wisdom. "I was right, it can be only opened by the pilot. Go to it, love."

Dust transmuted back into sand and burrowed through the metal hatch. A giant hole formed and the cabin quickly depressurized with Wisdom and Brand being sucked out into the sky and Dust following after them in a trail of sand. On cue, a portal opened beneath them.

"I love it when a plan comes together," said Wisdom.

---

**Brooklyn**  
**One Week Later**

Fury sat in the rear of a bar, sipping on a whiskey. Thanks to the smoking ban, he was without a cigar in his mouth at the moment and he needed one now. Maybe more than ever.

"Can you believe this non-smoking shit?"

"You read my mind," said Fury. "Was starting to wonder if you'd even show."

Wisdom sat across from Fury, holding a scotch in his hand. "I'm wounded, Nicky. You know I'm a man of my word."

"I'm glad to see that," said Fury. He raised his glass to Wisdom. "Looks like we pulled it off."

"That we did." Wisdom clinked his glass against Fury's. "Cheers, mate."

"This isn't gonna be easy," said Fury. "Once Brand came to, she was livid when she was told what happened. Keeping Dust on the sidelines, having Leighton contact your buddies in the Underground, all very smart moves. We never would've seen it coming."

"Pru took a ride in Dust's head and that way, they were able to get into the Triskelion so Pru could take over Brand," said Wisdom.

"Things are gonna get rough for you, Pete. Brand has declared open season on you. She'll come for you and she'll be after blood. Then there's the matter of Shaw. Plus, I'm guessing the Underground isn't too happy with Maverick after killing one of their friends."

"You let me worry about Maverick and the Underground," said Wisdom. "The important thing is that we got this far and we've got a scent of what's really going on."

"You have to understand you're on your own," said Fury. "This conversation never happened. I've got a lot of heat on me and I need to take stock of SHIELD—find out who I can trust and who I can't. That'll take some time. And you also have to realize that Brand's employed some of your old friends in the XSE, which means you also don't know who to trust."

"In our line of work, you never do, Nicky," said Wisdom. He raised his glass. "Here's to going underground."

---

## FORCING THE ISSUE

This issue took me a while to write and I went through a few drafts of it, actually. The ending for this arc kept escaping me and getting further and further away so I had to revise what I was going to do. I apologize for that and for those who expected a more definitive closure for my run, but I hope it worked for the most part.

There are problems, but I do think this issue reflects the reality of a world and that taking down something as massive as what Wisdom uncovered isn't something that can be resolved in one story-arc. I know there is some interest in this book continuing with another writer, so if that happens, I hope this story proves to be a good starting point for them.

As for me, it was fun writing *X-Force* for these past fifteen issues. Not a bad run in fanfic (hell, even in comics these days). Back when I first discussed taking on the reigns of this book with Cory and Dave, we decided that it would be best if the book had a stronger focus on the espionage angle, something that we all felt had been slightly lacking in the book despite its concept.

So I took that concept and ran with it and this book became sort of the underdog of the X-branch. It didn't get a lot of press, but what little it did was very positive. Judging from the comments, I succeeded in getting the espionage feel across.

As far as Weapon X goes, he's dead as dead can be. I feel like the character has sort of outlived his usefulness at the site and I felt I owed it to him to have him go out by my own hand rather than end up in obscurity.

There were mistakes and a lot of characters I brought into this series towards the end were done with the idea that I would be on this book for a longer time. That didn't end up playing out so I apologize for bringing in characters who appear to have no purpose in this book.

Also, perhaps one of the biggest flaws with this book is that it was more like *Pete Wisdom and X-Force* with all the focus on him. Again, I apologize for that and I realized after getting quite a bit into my run that *X-Force* should have ended with issue #12 and then I should have done these stories in a *Wisdom* series. But unfortunately, hindsight is 20/20.

Speaking of Wisdom, there was some discussion of me doing a solo series, but that's been curbed pretty much indefinitely. I've got too much other stuff going on at the moment and although I love Wisdom and would love to write him in a solo capacity, I'm afraid the story ideas just aren't there right now.

Hope you all enjoyed the run.

Dino Pollard  
April 30, 2009

[pollards-picks.livejournal.com](http://pollards-picks.livejournal.com)

---