

MARVEL

XAVIER'S INSTITUTE



TRIPTYCH

A PROSE NOVEL FROM THE PAGES OF X-MEN
JALEIGH JOHNSON

This is an excerpt from

TRIPTYCH

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BY JALEIGH JOHNSON

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X-Men super-soldier Fantomex faces off with clone versions of himself in this thrilling Super Hero heist adventure from Marvel's Xavier's Institute

Former super-soldier and master thief, Fantomex, stumbles upon one of his clones, Cluster, breaking into museums to steal priceless artifacts. Outwitted and intrigued, Fantomex decides to beat Cluster at whatever game she's playing. But something is different about these artifacts: they've all been infused with nanotechnology, very similar to the kind that originally created Fantomex. And they aren't the only ones looking for them... Their other clone, Weapon XIII, is on the hunt too. The cat-and-mouse heists test their burglary skills and push the boundaries of how much they can trust one another. When it turns out that they're the pawns in an even deadlier game, all hell breaks loose – and these clones always play to win.

CHAPTER ONE

It started with his death, so it was not an auspicious beginning.

But if this was the great beyond or some other version of an afterlife, it was remarkably boring. He floated in a warm, empty void, colorless and without sound. There was nothing to entertain him, nothing to do but think. He tried to reach for memories of the life he'd led before his death, but the effort left him strangely exhausted. Why should a dead man be weary, if his troubles were over? It didn't seem fair.

This brought him slowly to the realization that perhaps he was not dead after all but only being... remade.

He'd had the ability to heal himself once. At least, he'd thought that was him, but maybe he was remembering a different life or someone else's powers. The memories were like tiny fractals of light drifting before him. Some of them he couldn't quite grasp, and then they disappeared. Lost.

Almost more disconcerting than losing his life, he'd also lost his *name* somewhere along the way. To be fair, he knew

he'd collected several names over the course of his strange existence, so he would probably recollect one of them sooner or later. Even floating in this formless void. He was bound to find himself out here somewhere.

Most of his names had been given to him by others. Wasn't that always the way? People lining up to tell you who they think you are. It made them feel more secure when they could fit a name and a role to everyone. Put them in the right box, make them *understood*, and they ceased being a threat. The problem was that people were so very often wrong. Not only that, but they also tended to be unbearably certain and smug in their wrongness.

Certain and smug. Those words described him too, possibly. But they weren't names.

The void around him shifted, turning red, an invasive shade that didn't match his serene mood. Was someone knocking at his door? No matter. He wasn't going to answer.

A presence settled around him like a heavy cloak. Oh yes, there was definitely someone nearby. He was sure of it now. How long had they been there? Time was inconsequential in the void. It could have been a minute or a decade.

Whoever the person was, they were trying to align their energy with his. He felt a second heartbeat thumping steadily alongside his own. It was a bit creepy, if he was being honest. The question was, did they intend to aid him or attack? In his experience, it was almost always the latter. Well then, what if he just flicked their power back at them?

"I'm losing him!"

"Triage, what's happening?"

"He shredded the connection, pushed me out! He's never

done that before. I don't know if I can—"

Rude to be interrupted in the middle of a personal revelation. Now, where was he?

Ah, yes, death and names.

Jean-Phillipe Charles.

Now they were getting somewhere. That was a name that had once belonged to him. Charlie-Cluster 7 was another. Had he always been so fond of hyphens? He shuddered to think what pretentious horrors lay beyond the hyphen phase.

Weapon XIII.

Ah, Roman numerals. Of course. Well, they did carry a certain gravitas, he supposed, and that particular designation had meaning for many more individuals than just himself. It opened the floodgates to yet more memories, this time of the group – the deity, if you will – that had created him. The Weapon Plus program had fashioned him into the perfect being to hunt down mutants. He was something new, a mutant-Sentinel hybrid that was nearly unkillable.

Emphasis on the nearly.

The program had created others too, but this was a story about *him*, and so he latched onto the last name that floated into his mind.

"Fantomex."

Yes, precisely.

"Fantomex!"

The call was rather insistent. Perhaps it was the universe addressing him. If so, he'd better attempt to answer. Fantomex. Present. Alive. Resurrection man, at your service. What else have you got for me, universe?

He almost hated to leave that comfortable, introspective

void, but the walls were already wobbling and shredding around him, and he was being carried back into the light. It seemed death was done with him.

At least for now.

“What happened?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but he seems to be coming out of his healing trance.”

“You mean coma? Catatonic state? Is there even a word for what that was?”

“We thought you’d want to be informed.”

The voices blended together as everyone tried to talk at once, but Fantomex finally sorted out that there were three people somewhere nearby, though he only recognized two of their voices. He dragged his eyes open to see where he was, but there wasn’t much to entice him to keep them that way. The medical facility was a smallish room with cinder block walls painted in a wretched shade of gunmetal. Machines beeped incessantly, and the air reeked of mildew and hospital – two smells that should never go together.

The individuals discussing him were at first only discernible as blurs of color and motion, but his vision gradually brought them into focus, grouped near the door.

The door. One exit from this room. No windows. He made a note of the layout out of habit, even though he suspected he wouldn’t be going anywhere today. Or tomorrow. His body felt heavy and strange, his skin crawling as if he’d been pricked with a thousand needles. And his insides were hollow, like he’d been scraped out with a shovel. How long had he been floating in that void?

He forced himself to concentrate on the people in the room. They would obviously have some answers, but right now they were speaking about him as if he wasn't present. How irritating.

"He will need to be informed at once about his change in circumstances," said the lone woman among the three. When Fantomex saw her face, the turmoil and strangeness inside him eased just a little.

He knew her. He would know her in whatever form she took, and her face was the most welcome sight he'd seen since ... well, since he'd died.

She was tall, dressed comfortably in a pair of checked slacks and an olive cashmere turtleneck. Her skin was pale and white, her eyes pupil-less, shining a warm amber color. Her short red hair was trimmed into a bob around her impassive face, but despite the lack of an emotional display, he could feel she was agitated.

She was a part of him, after all.

E.V.A.

Like him, she was something entirely new.

She'd been created to function as his secondary central nervous system, but that was a crude oversimplification. E.V.A. had become much more than that during their time together, evolving from an artificial intelligence to a complex, techno-organic being, sentient and independent, who could take on multiple forms, one of them being the humanoid appearance she displayed now as she spoke to the two men.

Reluctantly, he turned his attention to them. The younger one he didn't recognize, but he already liked the man's sense of style. Warm brown skin, a spill of locs framing a tailored

suit with matching tie – he and E.V.A. were the only bright spots in the room – topped off by a pair of copper goggles that proclaimed, *Yes, I'm from the X-Men, but I refuse to be pigeonholed into spandex nightmare costumes. I have taste.*

Wait, how did he know he was among the X-Men? Ah, yes, the second man – Cyclops. The stoic Scott Summers, with the jaw so chiseled it made sculptors weep. He'd changed since Fantomex had seen him last, acquiring considerable gray in his hair and impressive scars on his body. There was nothing terribly exciting about his jeans and T-shirt, but that hardly mattered. The ruby quartz lenses he wore over his eyes would always be his defining feature. Unlike the young man's copper goggles, these were a permanent fixture that were less about saying, *Look at my unique style*, and more about keeping him from accidentally melting someone's face off.

So, he was among the X-Men again. That kept happening. But where was he now? This didn't seem like one of their usual haunts. To put it kindly, this was much more rustic and ... something about the place tugged at his memory. It felt ... familiar.

"He's awake. He's listening to us now."

E.V.A.'s voice stirred him from his thoughts. She and the others quickly crossed the room to his bedside, but it was Cyclops who addressed him first.

"Do you know who you are?" he asked. "Can you tell me your name?"

Well, at least all that introspection time hadn't been wasted. He licked his dry lips and said in a croaking voice, "They call me the Wolverine."

A muscle in Cyclops' granite jaw ticked. E.V.A. gave a quiet

sigh that carried equal parts relief and exasperation. “I think he’ll live,” she said.

“He should be dead after what he went through—”

“Christopher,” Cyclops said, cutting the other man off, “let’s take this slow.”

“Too slow and I’ll grow bored,” Fantomex said amiably. “My apologies for the humor. Let’s start over with the name: Fantomex.” He eased himself into a sitting position. The heaviness and needle-pain sensation were starting to fade, thankfully, and he was pleased to discover that there was minimal disorientation and muscle atrophy. He felt like he’d been in a healing state for quite some time, which was disconcerting, but his body was still quick to recover, even after death.

Only the hollowed-out feeling persisted.

He determined to ignore it. No doubt it too would pass with time.

“Do you know where you are?” Cyclops crossed his arms, glancing around the spartan accommodations.

“Judging by the décor, I’m tempted to call it a postmodern fallout shelter, but we’ll go with the next most appealing option: is it one of your schools?” he guessed. “Not sure which one. The names change so often, it’s hard to keep them straight.”

“It’s the New Charles Xavier School.” Cyclops seemed pleased, though it was difficult to tell behind the glasses.

“Well, it’s certainly a fixer-upper,” Fantomex said, “and abominably cold.”

“It suits our needs,” Cyclops said defensively. “What we lack in comfort, we more than make up for in security and secrecy.”

Security and secrecy. And cold. So cold. Fantomex felt a prickle at the back of his neck. He gazed at the room with new eyes, and an unpleasant awareness washed over him. He knew why the place felt familiar. He'd been here before. The facility they so cheerfully called a school had once been a testing ground for the Weapon Plus program. He should have known he would never fail to recognize a place imprinted with such... memorable experiences. Did the students here realize how many ghosts of traumas past walked these halls? For their sake, he hoped not.

Dismissing Cyclops for the moment, he turned to E.V.A., his voice softening as an unexpected swell of emotion overtook him. "You're a sight for sore eyes, old friend."

She inclined her head. "I'm pleased to see you're still functioning." Her voice held an affection born of their longtime bond. Some things even death couldn't sever.

"My memories have been shaken, stirred, and shattered," he said, with a rueful smile. "What happened to me? How long have I been recovering?"

"Three months," she said, stepping closer and settling herself in an uncomfortable-looking metal chair near the bed. She was so serious. Fantomex experienced a trickle of unease he wasn't used to feeling. "Before that, I was forced to resort to drastic measures to ensure your resurrection."

"Drastic, eh? You make it sound like I was a lost cause." He tried for a light tone, but he was reassessing himself as he spoke, exploring the parts of his body that had been most damaged... his heart, obviously, but there were other things wrong as well, things he hadn't noticed at first, being so glad that he was alive. His thoughts were different somehow. They

felt sluggish and tight, and his powers when he reached for them were slow to answer.

And some didn't respond at all.

Cyclops and the other man – Christopher, Scott had called him – exchanged glances, and Fantomex definitely didn't like what he saw reflected in the young man's eyes.

Pity.

"What happened to me?" he repeated, his tone sharpening.

Cyclops started to answer, but E.V.A. held up a hand. "This is my responsibility."

Gazing down at him, she bit her lip, a very human gesture. It shouldn't have rattled him, that expression of uncertainty, but it did. "You were dead," she said, not mincing words. "I'm unclear how much you remember from what came before, but the Brotherhood had you cornered – you and Psylocke. You sacrificed yourself to save her."

Oh yes, he remembered it. Her words were like a key turning in a lock. He was suddenly back there, caught in the moment when the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants had taken him, when the one called the Skinless Man cut his heart from his chest. How amusing that he'd probably made that same threat to dozens of his enemies over the course of his life: I'll rip your still-beating heart from your chest. But he'd always thought of it as more of a metaphor than a legitimate outcome. Very Shakespearean.

He'd never expected it to actually happen to him.

At least it had been for a noble cause. "Psylocke is safe, then?"

"Yes."

Good. He remembered he'd cared about her, though the

feelings were less immediate than they had once been. There'd been others with him too, members of the now defunct X-Force team: Wolverine, Deadpool. The names were coming back, but they carried the same distance that Psylocke's did. Maybe because they were part of a life that was over. He pushed them aside to focus on the now. He needed to know the rest of the story.

"We were able to recover your remains and return to the White Sky Facility," E.V.A. continued, "where an appropriate cloned body could be grown and integrated with your three brains, which were still functioning at limited capacity."

At this, Christopher twitched. "Hang on, did you say *three* brains?"

"It's complicated," Cyclops said. He nodded to E.V.A. "Go on."

"I should have realized the facility was not properly equipped to handle a Sentinel-mutant cyborg," E.V.A. said. "Again, I accept full responsibility."

"For. What?" Fantomex said, grinding his teeth as he sat up straighter on the hard bed.

"The facility made a mistake," E.V.A. said softly. "The A.I. interpreted the presence of three brains to mean that three separate clones would be needed. So three clones were grown, and a brain was placed in each one."

After that, it grew so quiet in the room Fantomex could hear distant voices coming from down the hall, the sounds of students laughing and talking as they moved between classes. Because, of course, this *was* a school. Students came here to learn, things like how to be a team player probably, how to use their powers to fight holograms in the Danger Room. Maybe

basic arithmetic too: one plus one plus one makes three.

“Fantomex.” Cyclops was speaking, but Fantomex wasn’t registering any of the words.

Empty. Scraped out. That’s why everything seemed so slow, why he was reaching for things that weren’t there. It wasn’t just a facet of his recovery or his lost memories. Some vital parts of himself were simply... gone.

More than his heart had been cut from his body. He’d been completely torn to pieces.

Christopher was speaking.

“How is that possible? Three brains in one body? Look, I’m a healer and I’ll admit I thought I could do some pretty cool stuff, but how does he even work?”

“Fantomex was created by the Weapon Plus program using a combination of mutant DNA and Sentinel nanotechnology,” E.V.A. explained. “He was raised in the World, a research facility designed as an experimental micro reality, a place meant to mimic parts of this Earth, but where time is fluid and controllable. He was intended to be the perfect mutant-killing cyborg, an unstoppable force.”

“Wait, you brought a mutant-killing cyborg into a *sanctuary* for mutants?” Christopher said, his voice a bit strangled.

Well, put like that, it was a bit much to take in. Fantomex wondered if Christopher realized his mouth was hanging open like a fish.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m not allied with the Weapon Plus program or its goals, though I do appreciate the unique gifts they have given me.”

“I guess that’s one way of putting it.” Christopher fiddled with the goggles atop his head. “It sounds like the weirdest

science project of all time.”

So, he was to be cast as Frankenstein’s monster now? A hot curl of anger spread through Fantomex, but with an effort he held onto his temper. “France,” he said curtly, drawing all their attention back to him. “The ‘science project’ I was raised in was an artificial reality that was made to look like France. It was imperfect but quite a nice environment, aside from the whole, ‘programmed to be a cold-blooded killer’ aspect.”

Christopher’s brow furrowed. “Huh. You know, I thought I detected a bit of an accent.”

“Just a bit?” Fantomex rubbed his hands over his face to keep from punching something. Or someone. “Ah, well. One third of a brain. One third of an accent. Easy come, easy go, I suppose.”

“That’s inaccurate,” E.V.A. said, as if sensing his budding fury. “You are a fully functioning, independent being. It’s true we don’t yet know to what extent your abilities and personality may have been affected by this change, but—”

“For now, at least, we’ll say I’m two cards shy of a full deck.” He leveled a cold stare at Christopher. “It’s time for you to leave, young man. Nothing personal. Nice suit, by the way.”

“Triage is still exploring his healing capabilities,” Cyclops put in. “He was instrumental in helping guide your healing processes over these last few months.”

“Speaking of which,” Fantomex said, aiming a finger at the ruby-eyed man, “how did I end up here in the frozen wilds, and where are my other halves, so to speak? Are they down the hall? Is Logan comforting one or both of them?”

“Neither of them accompanied us to the Institute,” E.V.A. said. “They left us immediately after the cloning process

was complete, and before I could evaluate their conditions. When I initially examined you, it seemed you were fine and ready to travel. But after we left the facility, something happened. You fell into what could only be described as a catatonic state and couldn't be revived. Possibly it was part of your natural healing ability and the recovery process, but you resisted all my attempts to communicate with you, and your vital signs became dangerously unstable. I conferred with Logan, who agreed the situation was dire and put me in contact with Kitty Pryde. After discussing it with the other instructors, she revealed the Institute's location and allowed me to bring you here to seek help. Upon arrival, I'd hoped that Emma Frost might be able to reach your mind, give us some indication as to how badly you were hurt."

"But as it turned out, Christopher was the one who was able to give us the most information on your condition," Cyclops said. "Why do you want him to go?"

"Privacy," Fantomex said. "A man can't be expected to talk about his lost brains with strangers."

He didn't know this healer, and the fewer people who were aware of the extent of his vulnerabilities right now, the better. He wasn't going to give anyone the chance to exploit his weaknesses.

He nodded to the door. "Go," he said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Cyclops sighed and gestured to Christopher. "Thank you for all your help," he said. "It's entirely possible you saved his life." This with a pointed look that Fantomex ignored. "We'll call you if we need you."

"Sure thing. Good luck, I guess." Christopher was still

looking at him with an infuriating mix of confusion and pity as he left the room.

“Now, since my memories are hazy on this topic, tell me about my new... companions,” Fantomex said when he’d gone. No, that didn’t feel right. What did one call these extensions of himself? Copies? Enemies? Rivals?

Imposters. That was more like it. For they could be nothing more than pale imitations, after all. They had to be.

E.V.A. glanced at Cyclops, and by her hesitation Fantomex had the impression this was something she hadn’t shared with him yet. “I have no intelligence on their activities since leaving the White Sky facility and separating from us,” she said, “but I can give you names and brief descriptions of their current identities. The first, and the one most closely matching your physical description, identifies as male and wears a costume similar to yours but inverting the color scheme, meaning he wears predominantly black with white accents. He goes by the alias Weapon XIII.”

“Embracing the dark side, is he?” Fantomex drawled. “Fine, so I have a goth brother. What about the other one?”

“The other identifies as female and goes by the alias of Cluster,” E.V.A. said. “Her costume closely matches your own white outfit with black accents.”

Fantomex waited, but she didn’t elaborate on those scant details. “That’s it?” He’d hoped there’d be more. Not that he particularly cared what they were like, but he needed some idea of their capabilities. He needed to know what powers they possessed that he no longer did.

She spread her hands. “As I said, my information is limited. I can only speculate as to why your counterparts chose to

separate from us. It was likely a combination of shock and disorientation at their altered state that motivated them. I had hoped there might be resources here we could utilize to find out more information about the two of them and their recent activities. It could be important to know where they are and what they've been up to."

"Agreed," Cyclops said. "We don't know their current conditions or intentions, and there are too few mutants remaining in the world to leave them unmonitored, especially after what's happened to all three of you."

"Ah, so now we come to it." Fantomex leaned back on the bed, clasping his hands behind his head. "I'm glad to see that your altruism has its limits. So, I'm to be kept here and *monitored* to make sure I behave in my new incarnation? To make sure I'm not unstable?"

His mouth curved in a lazy smile, but he was studying Cyclops intently, once again cursing the man's exceptional poker face.

What did Cyclops actually want from him? He'd forged uneasy alliances with the XMen and its subsidiary teams in the past, when the arrangement was of mutual benefit, but he was hardly in a condition to offer them anything at the moment. And they'd taken some pains to preserve his life over the last few months. Was it really because there were so few mutants remaining that they needed him?

A scraped-out shell was better than nothing, perhaps.

Cyclops shook his head. "I won't waste time trying to convince you that we want to help," he said. "For now, all I can offer is my assurances that you aren't a prisoner here. You can leave whenever you want, but I encourage you to stay at

least long enough to ensure you're fully recovered."

"So you're not afraid I might betray the location of your school to certain interested parties for my own benefit?" Fantomex said it lightly, knowing it was a risk to put the suggestion out there, but he wanted to see if he could get that granite façade to crack so that Scott might reveal more.

But Cyclops stayed steady as ever. "No more than you should fear that we'll tell those same interested parties about your current condition," he said. "We both have our vulnerabilities, but we also have strengths we can benefit from. Of course, it goes without saying that if you attempt to take advantage of or harm any of the students here, we'll be having a very different conversation." His tone left no room for misunderstanding. "As you said, my altruism only extends so far."

Fantomex dipped his head in acknowledgment. Thrust and parry. "I can assure you, E.V.A. and I will be on our best behavior while we remain your guests." He added, "And we'll be gone as soon as possible."

E.V.A. shifted in her chair. She looked as if she were about to speak but instead lapsed into silence.

"Get some rest, then," Cyclops said, preparing to take his leave as well. "You've been through a lot."

A more breathtaking understatement Fantomex had never heard.

CHAPTER TWO

It started with a breakup, so it wasn't an auspicious beginning.

All right, wait, this was no time to be dramatic. Avery Torres shivered, her breath making thick clouds in the frigid air. There hadn't been an actual breakup yet. But there were signs. Symptoms. It definitely felt like there was a breakup impending.

She adjusted her stocking cap over her cornrows and buried her nose in the puffy depths of her winter coat, wishing she'd remembered her scarf as she stomped through the frozen wilderness. When Scott Summers had told her this school was an underground fortress in the middle of an icy nowhere, she'd thought he must be exaggerating, but no, he was not overstating things.

She trailed behind the other students, who were all following Emma Frost on their daily constitutional, as their teachers liked to call it. Avery enjoyed a good long walk as much as the next person. The silence and stillness were

peaceful, inviting reflection and contemplation, but today she didn't want to be inside her own head. She needed noise and distraction. Something to take her mind off breakups, impending or otherwise.

"Watch your footing around here," Emma called back to them. Her face was partially obscured by a black fur-lined hood and scarf. "There are thick ice patches hidden under the fresh snowfall from this morning."

Terrific. Just a relaxing morning walk in subzero temperatures on treacherous ice.

"Seriously, I don't want anyone falling and cracking their head open – like last time," Emma added.

"Sorry," mumbled one of the students in an Australian accent. Eva Bell, if Avery remembered correctly. The others chuckled and clapped her good-naturedly on the shoulder.

"Don't worry, you know I'll fix you up if anything happens," Christopher Muse said, grinning.

Right, he was the healer. Avery knew that much. She'd met him on her first day here a couple of months ago. Everyone else already knew each other and had made their own friend groups. She suppressed a sigh. It had been like being in high school all over again, the new girl in class, standing at the front of the room trying not to look like the mayor of Awkward Town.

Not that she didn't have friends. What she had was better, actually, because she had her art, and she had Jane. For now, at least. And this morning walk was exactly the kind of absurd thing she would normally text Jane about. If things were normal.

Had they ever really been normal, though? Avery stomped

off the thick snow caking her boots. When was the last time she had truly felt settled and normal?

See, this was dangerous. Too many directions for her thoughts to go, not enough distractions. Glancing around to make sure no one was paying attention to her, Avery slipped her cell phone from her coat pocket and surreptitiously scrolled through the text message thread she'd started with her girlfriend. The cell reception in this place was nothing, but at least she could look back through this archive of her relationship with Jane, maybe search for clues, evidence of the moment things started to go wrong.

If she was being honest with herself, she didn't need to scroll back very far.

Exhibit A: the last text exchange, sent approximately two weeks ago, when she'd managed to wrangle a day trip to Edmonton for some alone time and cell reception.

Jane: You're at that museum again, aren't you? I know it's Edmonton, but does the frozen north really have that fascinating of an art scene?

Avery: You know what they say: life finds a way, and so does art.

Jane: Wow, OK, Jurassic Park, there aren't enough poop emojis in the world to express how bad that joke was.

Avery: You're proud of me. I can tell.

Jane: Guilty. You staring at that painting? The Woman and the Tower?

Avery: No.

Avery: Maybe. It just speaks to me, you know?

Jane: Reminds me, when are we going to speak again? You haven't told me how art school is going up there or sent me

any drawings lately. I need details. What have you been working on?

Details. Oh, she had details. Like how this so-called art school was truly a repurposed military facility that sheltered some of the few mutants remaining in the world. Like how Avery had been lying when she'd told Jane that she'd dropped out of the San Diego School of Art and Design to participate in a special program up here in Canada.

That she was being quite literal when she said her favorite painting at the Edmonton Art Museum spoke to her. It was just in a way that no one else could hear.

She hadn't known much about psychometry, the ability to touch objects and know intimate details about their history, when she'd first discovered her powers, and there was still a lot she had to learn, but that's why she'd come here. She knew she was one of the lucky ones. From the bits and pieces of stories she'd picked up from the other students, her journey to get to the school had been much less traumatic than it might have been had she come to the attention of organizations like S.H.I.E.L.D.

But she hadn't shared any of those details, which meant she was lying to her girlfriend by omission. And Jane was smart, much smarter than her. She was beginning to catch on that Avery was holding things back, that something wasn't right between them.

They should have had an honest conversation long before she'd come up here. It wasn't like Avery was forbidden from telling anyone that she was a mutant. Cyclops had simply cautioned her and the rest of the students to be selective with the people they trusted. He said even if they thought they

knew how their loved ones would react, there was always the chance that those same people would disappoint them in the ugliest possible way.

Avery had never forgotten the expression on his face when he'd told them that. He was usually hard to read wearing those ruby quartz glasses, but not that time. Haunted, that's what he'd looked like. He didn't want any of the students to get hurt.

Avery wanted to trust Jane, she really did, but she hadn't trusted anyone in a very long time.

Her mom had passed away when she was too young to remember. Her dad had gotten sick not long after her powers had first manifested, and she hadn't wanted to worry him, but if he'd recovered Avery would have told him the truth. She knew he would have accepted her, no questions asked, no doubts raised, the same way he'd accepted everything else about Avery, her whole life.

If her dad were still here ... what a world that would be.

The sun was making a valiant attempt to pierce the clouds above their heads, transforming the unbroken sheet of snow and ice stretching to the horizon into a brilliant, blinding canvas that stung her eyes. That's all it was, just the brightness making the moisture gather there.

Feeling miserable, and wishing she'd brought sunglasses, Avery almost didn't notice when the student walking a few feet in front of her brought his foot down squarely on a patch of that hidden ice Emma Frost had warned them about. He lost his balance, feet scrambling for purchase on the unforgiving ground.

Without thinking, Avery rushed forward, snagging the

student by his upper arms, locking him in place while he regained his footing. Adrenaline surged through her, her heart going like a hammer in her chest. By the time she'd recovered her equilibrium, the student had turned around and was looking at her in surprise, his cheeks flushed.

"You OK?" Avery asked, trying to place him. The one with the goatee – David Bond, or Hijack, as he was also known. She couldn't keep up with all the codenames.

"Stable now," he said, finding his voice. "Thanks, that was almost a disaster."

He was dressed in jeans and a thick winter coat like her, but *he'd* remembered a scarf and sunglasses. They fell into step together, going slower on the uncertain ground. At first, there was only awkward silence between them. Avery hated small talk, but she was trying to dredge some up when he nodded at her cell phone, which she still had clutched in her hand. Thankfully, she hadn't dropped it when she'd come to his rescue.

"You won't get any reception, even out here," he said. "Believe me, all of us have tried. We aren't technically supposed to have cell phones because they can be tracked and traced, but... well, you have to try to have some connection to the outside world, right?"

"No, I was just—" Trying to figure out a way to save her failing relationship. She mentally shook herself. This wasn't a conversation she wanted to have with anyone, let alone a guy she barely knew. "Yeah, you're right. I was just hoping to get lucky."

"Feeling homesick?"

"Something like that."

To Avery, homesick implied that there was a place she was missing, but even art school in California hadn't felt like home. She hadn't been there long enough. Only when she was with Jane had she started to feel that elusive sensation, that sense of belonging.

Now she was thousands of miles away from that.

"I've been curious about something," David said hesitantly, as if he didn't want to pry into her personal affairs. Still, he plunged ahead. "Well, we've all been curious, really, so I'm just going to ask. Are you in training to join the X-Men or not? Because you go to all the classes, and you participate and everything, even in the self-defense classes, but I've never seen you in any of the Danger Room simulations. And nobody has seen you use your powers, so..." he trailed off, inviting her to fill in the blanks.

He was going to be disappointed. "Look, I understand the curiosity," she said, "but my powers are a blip compared to the things some of the people here can do." She gestured at the students walking ahead of them. "From what I've seen, you all are amazing, and you're going to do great things for the world." She was amused when David puffed out his chest at her words. "I'm here to figure some things out about my abilities, and then I plan to go back to my life. This is temporary."

That had always been the plan.

He nodded, accepting the explanation, though she thought his eyes looked slightly disappointed behind the sunglasses. "Well, are you interested in making some friends while you're here? Temporary ones, anyway?"

He was smiling at her now, so she tried to smile back, but she thought it came out shaky and uncertain. She wasn't

used to people walking up to her and going straight for the friendship thing. Not their fault, necessarily. She went out of her way to avoid people most of the time. It was easier that way.

No, David was probably reaching out because she was a mutant. Safety in numbers, and all that. He wasn't really interested in getting to know *her*. Even if he was, she wouldn't be here long enough to get to know any of them in return.

But glancing over at him, she found she couldn't bring herself to disappoint him again, so she said, "Sure, maybe I can do that."

"Excellent." His smile widened, and then Christopher called to him from up ahead. "Gotta go," he said, "thanks again for the save."

When she was alone, Avery stuffed her cell phone back in her pocket and snuggled deeper into her coat. *Just keep your eyes on your goal*. All she wanted was to understand her abilities and to be able to control them. And to spend some more time with the painting. That was where everything had started, after all.

Which reminded her, she needed to make another trip into Edmonton soon. She hoped she would be allowed. Maybe if she waited a few more weeks. She could tell the instructors didn't like it when she asked. They wanted to keep the school's location a secret, and coming and going was a risk. But Avery was discreet, and she kept to herself, so she'd quickly earned the trust of Cyclops. She wasn't sure about Emma Frost, but it didn't matter. She didn't need to earn everyone's trust.

All of this is temporary, she told herself again as she lifted

her eyes to the horizon. It had to be. This was a fortress thinly disguised as a school. It wasn't the kind of place where anyone should look for a family or a home.

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