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XAVIER'S INSTITUTE

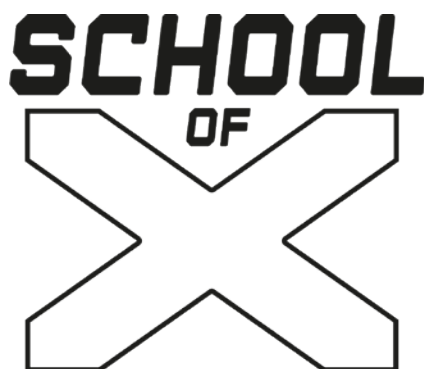
SCHOOL OF

SEVEN NEW STORIES OF THE X-MEN

EDITED BY

GWENDOLYN NIX

This is an excerpt from



A Xavier's Institute Anthology

EDITED BY GWENDOLYN NIX

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The next generation of the astonishing X-Men grow into true super heroes against their deadliest enemies, in this wide-ranging Marvel anthology

The New Charles Xavier School for Gifted Mutants isn't all it's cracked up to be: The food is so-so, and it's cold eleven out of twelve months, not to mention the creepy bunker vibes with mysterious tech popping up all over the place. But for the latest mutants to take on the mantle of X-Men, it's home. Under the stewardship of Emma Frost, Cyclops, and Magneto, these new recruits learn to control their powers and defeat villainy. Yet danger lurks within the academy, and it isn't just monsters or evil geniuses. Now, these fresh X-Men must take what they've learned and put their unique powers to the test against unexpected adversaries – from cyborgs and the undead to temporal chaos, and even alternate versions of themselves.

YOUR FIFTEEN MINUTES

Jaleigh Johnson

“I thought we were going to watch a Christmas movie,” Benjamin Deeds complained as the television lit up the dark common room with the fiery explosion at the top of the Nakatomi building, framing a panicked John McClane leaping to safety.

“This *is* a Christmas movie,” Fabio Medina argued as he settled into an ancient, weary beanbag chair that was more bag than beans, cradling a plate of pepperoni and mushroom pizza slices. “It transcends.”

That profound observation made him the target of multiple groans and several popcorn missiles from Eva Bell, who was draped on the sagging couch next to Celeste of the Stepford Cuckoos. Her sisters, Irma and Phoebe, were sitting on the floor next to Benjamin in a puddle of blankets and pillows. Christopher Muse and Avery Torres had grabbed the faded paisley armchairs that everyone jokingly referred to as

“mezzanine seating” near the back of the room, and David Bond lounged on the floor next to Fabio, eating pizza with one hand and plugging a finger-sized hole in the beanbag chair to keep it from shedding its contents all over the food.

OK, so they weren’t exactly living the dream, but the room was still theirs for the night.

Fabio lived for movie night. He no longer remembered whose idea it was, but over the past several months, it had become a ritual for the students to huddle around the television on Sunday evenings to watch a selection of movies from a cobbled together donation box assembled by the students and faculty. The only rules were: everyone took turns picking the movies, and no network television or real-world news allowed. They all had enough to deal with during the week with classes, training sessions, and all the worries and fears that came alongside being one of the few groups of mutants left in the world. Sunday nights were a night to escape and cut loose.

“Fabio’s got a point, though,” Benjamin said as the credits rolled a few minutes later. “This film redefined what makes a movie hero.”

David chuckled skeptically. “It’s popular, but it’s not like it reinvented the wheel or anything.”

“What’s your ideal movie hero then?” Fabio challenged. Movie debates were almost as much fun as the movies themselves.

“They have to be relatable,” Avery said, balancing her sketchbook on her updrawn knees while she reached for another fistful of popcorn.

“Agreed, but there’s something to be said for larger-

than-life qualities,” Christopher put in, leaning back in his chair. “Movie heroes drop the best one-liners at the perfect moment. They get to walk away from the fiery explosion looking all kinds of cool. The rest of us wish we could handle a crisis like they do.”

And they’re loved by everyone in the end, Fabio thought, as he wiped his fingers on a paper towel. Not that he needed to be a John McClane out there saving the world. He had a soft spot for other movie leads, too – the hard-boiled detectives and spies – the smooth characters who could talk everyone in circles with a twinkle in their eyes.

He wouldn’t mind if the real world was a bit more like the movies. In the movie version of his life, he would have a codename that wasn’t susceptible to the obvious jokes that came with being a mutant called *Goldballs*. In the movie version of his life, his powers would come with cool laser sounds – *pew! pew! pew!* – and not *poink!*

He sighed. Why was one of those sounds so cool, while the other one made people giggle uncontrollably?

It wasn’t like he didn’t know who he was in this great cinema of life. He was well aware he was the sidekick, the comic relief, the butt of the joke. If he was lucky, he wouldn’t also end up being the one sacrificed to advance the plot in some way. That was probably the best he could hope for, and he’d accepted it.

Sort of.

But to be the hero just once, to have his fifteen minutes of fame and glory... now that would be awesome.

The others were arguing over the next movie. Celeste said, “It’s my turn to pick.”

“Then pick,” Benjamin said. “It has to be a movie.”

“I know that.” Celeste rolled her eyes. “I’m just saying, what if we mixed it up one of these nights? Did karaoke? It could be fun.”

Next to her, Eva nodded enthusiastically, but Irma and Phoebe raised their hands in a simultaneous thumbs-down gesture. Seeing this, Celeste flushed and glared at the pair of them.

That was weird. Fabio couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen them at odds. Or sitting so far apart. Something else was different, too. It took him a minute, but then he realized Irma had dyed her hair black, in sharp contrast to the others’ blonde look. He started to say something about it, but abruptly the word “karaoke” penetrated his pizza-fogged brain.

“Hold on.” He sat up in the beanbag chair with a loud crinkling of vinyl. “Benjamin’s right, this is *movie* night. Karaoke is against the rules.” And the laws of nature.

Celeste opened her mouth to argue, but seeing that Eva was her only ally, she deflated and burrowed into the couch cushions. “It was just a suggestion,” she mumbled. “I don’t really care what we watch.” There was a glint of moisture on her cheek that might have been a tear, but she quickly turned her face away from the rest of them before Fabio could be sure.

He hoped he hadn’t upset her by shooting her down. Maybe he’d been a little harsh, but it was *karaoke*. The thought of getting up in front of everyone and singing made the pizza churn in his stomach.

Movie heroes never had those kinds of problems, either.

“Hate to break it to everyone, but we probably shouldn’t start another movie tonight,” Christopher said, pointing to

the clock on the wall. It was almost midnight. “Early training session tomorrow in the Danger Room, remember?”

There was a chorus of groans as one by one the students peeled themselves out of their chairs and nests of blankets to start cleaning up the food. It looked like a minor storm had blown through the room, but they eventually sorted it out.

As Fabio carried a stack of greasy plates to the garbage cans in the kitchen, he couldn't help but feel a pang of longing. Despite their grumbling, he had no doubt that tomorrow everyone would get a chance to shine somehow in their training session. He was scheduled to go first thing with the Stepford triplets, whose psychic powers were so strong, he knew he'd barely have to try in order to receive a passing grade. He supposed he should have been happy about that, but it just reinforced the role he'd been assigned in his own life.

Always the sidekick, never the hero.

He'd fallen asleep at his desk again.

Any minute now, Magneto was going to yell at him and everyone in the classroom would laugh. Not cruelly, just... you know, there goes Fabio, sleeping in class again, ha ha, of course.

Maybe if he lifted his head slowly and wiped the drool on his sleeve, no one would notice.

A hand grabbed his shoulder and gave him a teeth-rattling shake.

“Medina!”

“Present!” He jerked his head up, looking blearily around the classroom. Had the lights dimmed while he slept? Everything looked gray and dull – more so than usual – almost

as if the entire room had been painted in black and white.

Wait a minute.

He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again. Shut. Open. Everything *was* in black and white. And he wasn't sitting in a classroom. He was slumped behind an old wooden desk in a cluttered office that looked like it belonged in a different century. Big metal filing cabinets lined one wall, and a small couch was pushed up against another wall near the door. The desk's surface was littered with papers and dirty coffee cups. An old rotary telephone sat near his right elbow.

He wasn't alone in the room.

Three women stood in front of the desk. They were identical, from their shoulder-length hair to the style of their skirts, and all three of them wore soaring high heels that looked terribly uncomfortable. The one nearest him had her hand on his shoulder. She'd been the voice he'd heard, the one who'd woken him. That voice was familiar somehow, but he couldn't place it.

"What's going on?" he asked around a huge yawn. Was he still dreaming? He dug his fingernails into his palm until it hurt. Nope, not a dream.

"Detective Medina," the woman who'd woken him said impatiently. "We had an appointment. Surely you haven't forgotten?"

He had absolutely no idea what she was talking about. He looked at the other two women for a hint, but they only stared at him expectantly.

"I... yes, our... appointment. Of course." Nope, he had nothing. His underarms were damp with sweat. What was he doing here? Where was here? *Who* was he again?

He felt like he should have the answer to at least one of those questions. The fact that he was hazy on all three threatened to send him into panic mode. His gaze swung wildly around the room, looking for something to help him out. The office door had a pane of glass set into its top half, and on the outside, there was a sign. It was backwards from his point of view, but he managed to read it anyway.

Medina Investigations.

“Detective Medina?” the woman said again, a hint of desperation in her voice.

Suddenly, a sense of wellbeing washed over him, like a cool breeze on a hot day. Medina turned his head. There was a small window in the wall to his right. He took in his faint reflection in the glass. He was dressed in a weathered trench coat and an old but stylish fedora.

That’s right. He was Detective Medina of Medina Investigations. This was his office.

When he looked back at the women, he gave them an easy smile. “Don’t worry, I never forget an appointment.”

The woman who’d woken him straightened up, looking more confident now. “My name is Celeste, and these are my sisters, Irma and Phoebe.”

Again, that sense of familiarity washed over Medina, those names bouncing around inside his head like balls going *poink poink poink*. Celeste, Irma, Phoebe. But they’d never met before. Had they?

“What can I do for you?” he asked, getting back on track.

“Detective Medina, I won’t waste your time. I just need fifteen minutes to tell our story.” Celeste paced the small office in agitation, her hands clasped in front of her. “My sisters and

I were on expedition in the Amazon, where we discovered an ancient treasure.” She nodded to Irma, who reached inside a large bag she had propped against her hip. She pulled out an object roughly the size of an ostrich egg.

“I assume you’ve heard the legend of the Golden Sphere,” Irma said as she put the object on his desk.

He laid his hands on the smooth, cool surface, fighting back another rush of familiarity. “Of course,” he said. “Everyone knows the legend of the Golden Sphere.”

Right?

“Word got around that we found it,” Phoebe said, coming over to the desk and taking the sphere out of his hands. She gave it back to Irma, who slipped it carefully into the bag. “Now there are some very bad people chasing us.”

“What sort of ‘bad people’ are we talking about?” Crossing his arms, he leaned back in his chair.

“The usual,” Celeste said. She stopped pacing and perched on the edge of his desk, as if to take the weight off her high heels. Really, those shoes looked awfully uncomfortable. “Thieves, criminals – they all want the sphere for themselves. We need protection until we can decide what to do with it.”

“All right, I’ll take your case,” he found himself saying without stopping to think about it, “but my protection fees are steep.” He leaned forward, elbows propped on the desktop. “Now, first things first. Do you know if you were followed here?”

Celeste shook her head firmly. “We kept a close eye out,” she said. “No one saw—”

She was interrupted by the loud *rat tat tat* of gunshots shattering the window.

“Get down!” Medina shoved his chair back, and all four of them hit the floor as more gunshots rang out in the small office.

“They found us!” Celeste shouted, panic rising in her voice as she crouched next to her sisters. She threw her arms protectively over the pair of them, shielding them with her body.

Medina fumbled in his bottommost desk drawer for the revolver stashed there. He army-crawled across the floor to the door. “Follow me and stay low!”

They ran down a narrow hallway to the back door of the building, which spilled onto a dimly lit alley. He herded the sisters behind him, leading the way with gun drawn, watching the inky shadows for any signs of movement. There was no sound except the huffs of their breathing. The air was crisp with late autumn cold.

Rounding the corner of the building, he halted and cursed. The street dead-ended in a brick wall.

Wait, that didn’t make any sense. He’d gone this way a hundred times to get to his car. It should be right there.

Gravel crunched behind them. Medina whirled to see a trio of figures emerging from the shadows at the other end of the alley. Their faces were obscured, but he could clearly see the guns they held.

Irma and Phoebe stepped forward, shielding their sister. Medina raised his own weapon, but he wasn’t fast enough. Three sharp pistol cracks rang out, and a dull pain punched Medina in the shoulder. Next to him, Irma and Phoebe dropped to their knees, spots of blood darkening the fronts of their blouses.

“No!” Celeste screamed, but Medina couldn’t get to her. His world had gone hazy and soft, and he was sinking into darkness.

He was staring up at the stars. Ursa Major winked at him as if it knew something he didn’t. A cold wind pushed through the thin fabric of his bodysuit.

Wait, what?

He sat up, his ears ringing faintly as he stared down at himself. He was dressed all in black, a mask covering his face. Glancing around, he realized he sat on the roof of an extremely tall building. A voice called out from behind him.

“Medina, get over here! The countdown clock is at fifteen minutes!”

Right, the bomb.

He stood on legs that were a little wobbly. He touched his shoulder, rubbing away a faint ache. What had he just been doing?

“Medina!”

He turned. Celeste, Irma, and Phoebe, wearing identical black bodysuits, were crouched around a bulky metal cylinder with a countdown clock in its center. Its red digital numbers tracked how much time was left before they were all blown to bits. Less than fifteen minutes now. A panel hung open in the cylinder’s bottom, wires spilling out like entrails. Celeste was frantically separating them, trying to find the ones they could splice to disarm the bomb.

He sprinted over to the group, joining Celeste in the mess of wires. The city’s biggest crime boss had discovered Medina’s elite team of assassins’ headquarters in the building

below. They'd planted the bomb, and now if he didn't disarm the device, the explosives would level the building and five city blocks.

They were running out of time.

Medina glanced up at the countdown clock. He blinked, and the timer was at two minutes. Wait, how had that happened? It had just been fifteen! Hadn't it? His palms were sweating beneath his gloves as he frantically worked the wires.

"We've got company!" Celeste cried as the whirring of helicopter blades filled the air. Four black cables fell from the craft, which hovered thirty feet above the rooftop. Four assassins wearing the crime boss's signature crimson suits rappelled down and landed on the roof, brandishing knives and swords.

"Phoebe and I will hold them off," Irma told him. "You two keep working!"

The sisters darted across the roof like vicious shadows, engaging the other assassins. Medina finally found the elusive red wire and began splicing it with the two green wires Celeste held in her trembling fingers.

"It's going to be OK," he told her. "They've got this. We just need to focus on disarming the bomb."

He twisted the wires together, and the countdown clock stuttered, but kept going. A vague sense of unease tickled the back of his mind as he worked. Was this really how bombs got disarmed? It almost felt like he was picking wires at random, and he wasn't even sure he knew how the mechanism worked.

No, this was right. This was what he had to do. He was part of an elite team of assassins, and he would protect them at all costs.

Celeste screamed.

Medina jerked his head up in time to see one of their attackers pulling his sword out of Phoebe's stomach. She clutched the wound and fell limply to the ground. Irma was now surrounded.

"Take over!" Medina shoved the wires at Celeste and ran to help Irma, but as he moved, he noticed a shadow shift in one corner of an adjacent rooftop. "Sniper!" he yelled, diving and rolling as a hail of gunfire peppered the air. He jumped to his feet, but one of the assassins was bearing down on him, blade ready.

Desperate, Medina spun and tried to dodge, but the blade sliced smoothly into his shoulder. Distantly, he heard Celeste scream again as the beep of the countdown clock echoed in the air, ticking down to zero.

The last thing he heard was the sound of a terrific explosion, a ball of fire filling the air. Then he saw nothing at all.

He woke to the sound of gunfire and a revving engine, the reek of oil and gasoline searing his nostrils. It was suffocatingly hot. His white tank top stuck to him like a second skin.

They'd been pinned down in the chop shop. Celeste, dressed in shortalls and a bandana, crouched against the opposite wall beneath a shattered window, holding up a gun and firing blindly at their attackers outside.

"We have to get the sphere out of here," Phoebe said, sliding behind the wheel of the rocket red Mitsubishi parked near the garage door, handing the legendary Golden Sphere to Irma, who huddled in the passenger seat.

Yes, they had to get the sphere to safety. But instead,

they'd gotten trapped after the gangsters hunting them had discovered their shop.

Wait, was that right?

There was a sharp ringing in his ears, and his mouth felt funny, like it was full of cotton. His shoulder ached like someone had punched him hard, but when he reached up to touch it, there was no wound.

"We're fifteen minutes from the border," Celeste said. Keeping low, she crossed the concrete floor and dove into the passenger seat of a second Mitsubishi, sky blue with a spoiler that went on for days. "Medina, we have to cover my sisters!"

He looked down at the gun and car keys he hadn't realized were in his hand. He felt so strange, like he'd done all of this before. Well, maybe not exactly this, but some version of this. What was happening to him?

"Medina, we need you!"

They always needed him. And he would come through.

Except... no, that wasn't right. He hadn't come through. He'd failed, and it kept happening, and...

"Medina!"

He sprinted to the blue car, throwing himself behind the wheel. Celeste slammed the button to raise the creaky old garage door. Tires screeched as they peeled out of the shop into the humid night, trailing close to Irma and Phoebe's Mitsubishi.

They were going to get away. No car in the city could match these deadly twins for speed...

"They've got a rocket launcher!" Celeste screamed as the rocket-propelled explosives streaked toward the cars. Medina spun the wheel, but he wasn't fast enough.

Explosions engulfed both cars, but the fire didn't burn. Medina felt a stabbing pain in his head, and the ringing in his ears grew more intense.

Then there was nothing.

"Detective Medina!"

"I'm here!" He'd fallen asleep at his desk again. Celeste stared down at him, worry and fear in her eyes. He must have been lying on his shoulder. It ached abominably, and there was a loud ringing in his ears.

He looked up at Celeste. Wait, how did he know her name? He'd never met her before, or the other two women standing near the door.

No, of course he knew them. Irma and Phoebe. They were psychics...

No, they were in trouble. They were going to ask him for help with... something.

"We need to protect the legendary Golden Sphere," Celeste said, as if she could read his thoughts. She placed the vaguely egg-shaped sphere in front of him on the desk. It made a soft *poink* sound as it came to rest.

And with that sound, Fabio remembered.

Fabio Medina.

Not the detective in a trench coat in this black and white world. Not the leader of an elite team of assassins. Fabio Medina – Goldballs – like the one sitting on the desk in front of him. And the sisters who'd come to seek his help were the Stepford Cuckoos.

None of this was real. Or at least, it shouldn't be.

"Detective–"

“Let me think a minute!” He hadn’t meant to shout, but he was scared. How long had he been living inside these weird movie moments? What was going on?

He tried to remember the last time things were normal. He’d been among friends. There’d been food. Movie night, that was it. They’d been discussing movie heroes. Did that mean this was some elaborate dream brought on by too much late-night pizza and action flicks?

He shifted in his chair, and a jagged bolt of pain went through his shoulder, making him grit his teeth. No, definitely not a dream. But why couldn’t he remember anything past the movie night? There’d been something going on the next day. He vaguely recalled getting up early and heading to the Danger Room.

That was it.

Emma Frost had paired him with the Stepford triplets for a telepathic training exercise. Obviously, something had gone very wrong.

“Celeste,” he said, looking up at the closest sister. “Do you know who I am? Who I *really* am?”

She looked at him in confused impatience, her forehead wrinkling. “Detective Medina, we don’t have time for games. This is serious.”

He couldn’t agree more. “My name’s Fabio. I’m not a detective. I’m one of the X-Men, and so are you. None of this is real.”

She scowled, as if he wasn’t making sense. “You’re *Detective Medina*. You’re supposed to be the best at what you do. That’s why we came to you. You solve crimes, you right wrongs, and you help people who need help.”

“And if he can’t help us, we need to get out of here,” Irma snapped, grabbing the sphere. “We have to get this to safety.”

“OK, first of all, I *am* trying to help,” he said. “Secondly, do you even know where we’re supposed to take that thing?” When they just stared at him blankly, he plowed on. “Think about it. We’re all in black and white. Doesn’t that strike you as odd?”

The three of them stared down at themselves, but only Celeste seemed unsettled by what she saw. Irma and Phoebe looked at each other in confusion. “We look like we always have,” Irma said slowly.

Gunshots shattered the window, sending them all diving for cover. Great, he’d forgotten about this part of the scene.

“Out the back!” he yelled to the others, herding them toward the door. He had to find a way to get the triplets to remember who they really were. They were psychics. If anyone could get them out of this, it was them.

They ran down the long hallway, but this time, when they exited the building, Fabio turned everyone right instead of left, avoiding the dead end.

He rubbed his shoulder as they ran. Celeste noticed and said, “Were you hit?”

“No,” he said, trying to sound reassuring, but it felt like he had been hit. His head hurt. The ringing in his ears was constant now. It seemed to be steadily getting worse with each deadly vignette they went through. Was it possible they could die here, caught in some kind of psychic trap?

“We should split up,” Irma said as they came to an intersection. To the left, the road ran between two tall warehouses, and to the right was an all-night diner. “Our car’s

two blocks away. Phoebe and I will go get it and pick you up.”

“No,” Celeste said immediately, as Irma glared at her. “We’re not separating. It’s too dangerous.”

Something tickled the back of Fabio’s mind as he watched them argue. This had happened before, too. In all the movie scenes, there was a moment when Irma and Phoebe tried to act on their own, without Celeste. Then everything went wrong.

Did that mean something?

“Fine,” Celeste was saying, “we don’t have time to fight, just get the car.”

Fabio had a sinking feeling as the two sisters started to walk away. His fears were confirmed when four men with guns stepped out, seemingly from nowhere, to block their path. “Hands up,” the lead man barked. He had a thick, square jaw and the beginnings of a beard. “Give us the Golden Sphere.”

Fabio’s thoughts whirled, his mind replaying the plot of every heist movie he’d ever seen, trying to come up with a way out. These scenes always ended in tragedy, but why? Was it possible they could rewrite the script by doing things differently?

“We’ll give you the sphere,” he blurted out before the triplets could say anything.

Celeste looked at him as if he’d lost his mind. “We can’t!”

Why not? he wanted to shout in frustration, but he kept his cool. He glanced over at Irma, who held the sphere tightly in her hands and glared at him. OK, no help there. He took a deep breath and let it out, turning to face their enemies. Time to see if he could change the ending of this scene himself.

“You want a gold ball?” Hands up, he spread them wide and tried to make his lip curl in amused disdain, just the way

the movie heroes did right before they laid waste to the bad guys. “Have a bunch.”

Poink!

Poink!

Poink!

Poink!

Poink!

Poink!

Gold balls flew from his body, catching the gunmen completely unawares and knocking them off their feet. They opened fire as they fell. A stray bullet struck Fabio in the shoulder – always got him in the same spot – and this time, the pain that ripped through him was so intense it drove him to his knees. The gold balls vanished as if they’d never been there.

“Run!” he cried feebly, but Irma wasn’t listening. Over Celeste’s scream of protest, she ran to his side and hauled him to his feet. With her help, he tried to run, but the pain made his head swim.

One of the gunmen rolled onto his side and fired again. Irma was suddenly a dead weight at his side. They slumped to the ground together, and all Fabio could hear were Celeste’s screams.

He looked over at her as his vision began to darken. She was unhurt. But how? She was standing right in front of the gunmen. There was no way they could have missed her.

He fought the darkness reaching up to claim him again. This was important. He needed to figure this out. Celeste was never hurt in any of the movie scenes. It was always him, Irma, and Phoebe.

Celeste. She was at the heart of this somehow. He had to get through to her.

He woke with a gasp and sat up. He was on the roof of a building again.

Oh no, not another bomb.

Gray predawn light filled the sky, but the wind carried a strange, foul scent, like something had been rotting in the sun. He didn't remember this movie set. Was it new?

Celeste laid her hand on his shoulder. She was dressed in ripped jeans and a sweat-stained t-shirt. He wasn't looking any better in a faded camo jacket and cargo pants, and he smelled like he hadn't showered in a week.

"Sorry to wake you," Celeste said, her voice grim, "but they're coming."

"Who's coming?" he asked, but then he shook his head. It didn't matter. Whatever it was, it would kill him again, and he wasn't sure how many more of these scenes he had in him. His shoulder was on fire, and his thoughts were sluggish. It hurt to concentrate.

"Celeste," he said, grabbing her wrist when she started to turn away from him. "You have to snap out of it. None of this is real."

She wasn't listening. "We've only got a little ammo left, a few grenades," she said, "so when they start swarming, make them count. I have to go check on my sisters."

He tried to ignore the tightening in his gut when she said *swarming*. "We've done this before," he said, trying to be patient. "It always ends the same way. Why? Are you causing this?"

"Seriously?" Her fists clenched as she stared at him in

disbelief. “You think *I* brought about the zombie apocalypse?” She stabbed a finger angrily at the surrounding rooftops. He followed the gesture and broke out into a cold sweat.

A horde of grotesque, bent-limbed zombies shuffled toward them, their flesh gray and rotting, the reek of them filling his nostrils and making his stomach roil. He glanced over the nearby ledge where dozens more zombies scrambled slowly, creepily up the side of the building. Faintly, he heard the sound of shuffling and moaning coming from the floors below them. They were trapped up here.

OK. OK. Breathe, Fabio, breathe. Panicking would just hasten their demise, and he had no desire to be eaten alive by zombies, psychic trap or not.

He squeezed Celeste’s wrist, ignoring her angry protest. “I need you to remember,” he pleaded. “We were having movie night. At the Institute. Remember the Institute?” He stared into her eyes, willing her to listen. Was that a flicker in her expression? He plunged on. “The next day we were supposed to do a telepathic training exercise. You and your sisters connected to me psychically. Something went wrong, and now we’re stuck in these movie scenes that end in me and your sisters dying, but never you. It’s *hurting* me, Celeste, so I bet it’s hurting them, too. We need to find a way to break this cycle before someone gets killed for real.”

When he mentioned her sisters, Celeste’s eyes widened. He’d been right. That was the key.

“You were upset with them last night,” he said, piecing it together on the fly. The sounds of zombie groans were getting closer. He could hear their blunt nails scrabbling for purchase on the window ledges and grooves as they climbed

the building. It made his skin crawl.

"I... that's not..." But Celeste was thinking now. He could see it. Some of the fear in her face was being replaced by confusion and doubt.

"You wanted to do karaoke. We told you no, and you were hurt. I noticed, and I should have said something to make you feel better. I'm sorry. I was wrapped up in my own stuff." He was babbling now. "I was thinking about how much I wanted to be a movie hero, and you—"

"I was afraid my sisters were leaving me behind."

Fabio's breath caught. He stared at her hard. "Does that mean you remember?" He barely dared to hope.

She squeezed her eyes shut and let out a long breath. When she opened them again, she nodded. "We let our thoughts intrude on the training exercise and lost concentration. Now our worries and fears are all tangled up and manifesting in bizarre ways."

So that was it. Fabio's obsession with movie heroes had gotten them stuck in a loop of movie scenes, and Celeste's fear of losing her sisters wasn't allowing any of the scenarios to end happily.

Emma Frost had warned them about the dangers of being distracted during telepathic exercises. Now they were seeing the consequences firsthand.

"Can you wake us up?" Fabio demanded. "I don't know how much more of this we can take before it breaks our minds."

On the opposite side of the roof, Phoebe screamed.

Fabio turned in horror to see a line of zombies cresting the rooftop. Irma and Phoebe opened fire, but there were far too

many of them. The horde descended, and they disappeared under a pile of gray bodies.

"No!" Celeste tried to run to them, but Fabio held onto her. She was strong and desperate. It took everything he had to keep her in place.

"This isn't real!" he insisted. "Your sisters are OK, and they're still with you, even if you're fighting, because you're family. If you really want to help them right now, you need to get us out of here!"

"I can't!" Tears rolled down Celeste's face, but her cheeks were red with fury. "I'm trying, but nothing's happening! I hate this! I don't even like these dumb movies!"

Under normal circumstances, Fabio would have been outraged by that comment, but since they were about to be murdered by a zombie horde, he let it pass.

And he suddenly had an idea.

"In the last scene, I was able to use my powers and take control of the story for a few seconds," he said. As he spoke, he lobbed one of the grenades as hard as he could to the other side of the roof. He and Celeste ducked as the explosion sent a ball of fire mushrooming into the sky. Zombie parts flew everywhere.

"I remember," Celeste said, grabbing her rifle to pick off zombies as they came onto the roof. "But it didn't work. You and my sisters still got shot."

"I think it's because you originated the psychic connection," Fabio said, tossing another grenade. "So, you're the only one who can fully control it. You should be able to do whatever you want here. Think about it. Do you know how to shoot that rifle in real life?"

She looked down at the gun in her hands, brow furrowed. "So, you're saying I should try to think bigger? Change the whole connection?"

"Exactly! I think fear is what's holding you back." The horde was getting closer. There were hundreds of zombies clustered on the surrounding rooftops now. "You have to move past it. But whatever you do, please do it fast!"

"Change the story," Celeste murmured. "That makes sense. Change it to something I love." She turned sharply to look at him. "We need this to be a musical!"

"A what now?" It was the only thing she could have said to distract him from the ravenous zombies.

"A musical! We change the movie scene into something that won't kill us. What better than a big musical number?"

It was actually a great idea, and it just might work, except for one thing. "I can't sing," he said in a choked voice. "I'm terrible. There's no way."

Mouth flattening, she grabbed him by his shirtfront and gave him a shake. "I ran from gunmen in two-inch heels and fought assassins in an itchy unitard in your version of this nightmare," she hissed. "Use the mic, songbird."

He gulped. "O- OK. What mic?"

"The one in your hand."

He looked down, and sure enough, his last grenade had turned into a shiny silver cordless microphone. Celeste's rifle had become another one in sparkling gold. She raised it to her lips and without hesitation belted out the opening verse of a familiar song, a tide of orchestral accompaniment rising from nowhere to support her.

Oh, for the love of... She'd picked "We Go Together", the

ending number to Grease.

What happened next was one of the strangest, most impressive things Fabio had ever seen.

As Celeste launched into the song, the psychic vision picked up on her energy, almost as if it had been waiting all this time for her to take control. The sun rose past a bank of gunmetal clouds, saturating the rooftop scene with orange, red, and purple light. Their filthy clothes morphed into tight pants and stylish leather jackets. The zombies froze in place as the clear, ringing notes of Celeste's chosen song filled the air. Slowly, they began to sway in time to the music, crooked limbs flapping weirdly with the beat. It was horrifying. It was unnatural.

Fabio couldn't look away.

Celeste elbowed him in the ribs, and he realized he hadn't joined in the number. He hadn't been lying about his lack of talent, but at that moment he decided he didn't care. Celeste's plan was working.

He sang, moving awkwardly in time to the music, but the microphone took his words, mixed them into the psychic stew and churned out a performance that even Travolta might have been proud of.

This was nothing like the movie musical he barely remembered. It felt more like they were a cover band performing their own version of the song, and the crowd of zombies responded. They clapped and swayed and gyrated and suddenly, transformed. No longer were they a ravenous horde bent on consuming everything. They were a supporting cast, adults and children dancing and singing and smiling while Celeste led them in the closing number

and its nonsense lyrics that everyone could just bop along to.

That's why she'd picked that particular musical and ending song, he realized. It was light and fun, a celebration of love and freedom and the possibilities of the future. Fabio threw back his head and closed his eyes as the scent of fresh flowers and the feeling of endless hot summer days filled the air, replacing the stench of rot and death. He felt Celeste take his hand and give it an encouraging squeeze...

And then he was opening his eyes to find himself lying on the floor of the Danger Room, his weight pressing his shoulder painfully into the hard floor. Students and instructors clustered around him, their faces breaking into relieved smiles.

"How long was I out?" he croaked as they helped him sit up.

"Not long," Triage said. "About fifteen minutes."

Later, after an extended stint in the infirmary to make sure no permanent damage had been done during the psychic vision, Fabio found Celeste in the television room digging through the box of old movies.

"It's amazing how many of these I recognize now, even though I've never seen them," she said as he sat down across from her. "You really know your movies."

"Well, you smashed that musical number," he said, rubbing the back of his neck self-consciously. "Listen, I wanted to say thanks, for getting us out of that vision."

She shook her head, her expression troubled. "It was my fault we were stuck in the first place. My sisters and I have

always done everything together, but lately it feels like we couldn't be more different." She picked at a loose bit of cardboard on the box lid. "Obviously, I'm not handling that very well. I need to talk to them, but they don't remember anything from the vision, so I don't know how I'll explain everything." She sighed. "Anyway, I'm sorry you got pulled into my fears and worries."

"You weren't the only one responsible," he argued. "If I'd been less obsessed with the whole 'movie hero' bit, we might never have ended up in those gunfights and explosions." He felt his cheeks warm. "So, you know all my dark secrets now. It must seem pretty silly, me imagining myself as all these larger-than-life characters."

"I'm sure you're not the first person who wished they were the hero of an epic movie," she said dryly. "Your secret's safe with me."

He was relieved to hear it, but he realized he couldn't leave it like that. Not when it wasn't the whole truth. "I had another reason," he said quietly, "for wanting to be the hero."

"What was that?"

"Everyone loves movie heroes." He stared down at the covers of the DVDs in the box. "People aren't afraid of movie heroes. They accept them, cheer them on, all that stuff. Well, isn't that what mutants want, to be accepted by the world? If we could be heroes like in the movies, surely that acceptance would come easier?" That's what he'd hoped at least, deep down inside.

She gave him a sad smile. "Maybe, but it's easy to embrace something that isn't real. Life is a lot messier and more complicated." She reached across the box and laid a hand on

his arm. "But you came through for *me* today when I needed it. You were a hero, even if the rest of the world doesn't know about it."

She was right. No one else would ever understand exactly what went down in that vision, but they'd been there for each other, and that kind of acceptance was better than any movie. It was real.

"Thanks," he said, and took a deep breath. "For what it's worth, I think you should try talking to your sisters, even if it's hard. And if it helps, I'll support your bid for karaoke night next week."

Her eyes brightened in surprised pleasure. "Really?"

"Yes," he said before he could rethink it. "I'm going to be terrible, and you'll regret you ever suggested the idea, but anything for a friend."

Should he have used the word 'friend'? He wasn't sure, but somehow it felt right. When a slow smile spread across Celeste's face, he knew that it was.

"You're on, Medina."

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