

THE RUNAWAYS, Part 2 by B. Nickerson {Rated PG}

Synopsis: *First Jubilee, now Rogue has runaway and little does she know she's run right into dangerous arms!*

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At the same time the team was picking-up Jubilee and chasing Trent Boland, Rogue was taking the Metro subway from Reagan National downtown and making her way to Dr. Henrietta Pierian's clinic. It was in a less-than-classy part of downtown DC with an unobtrusive, street-level entry and narrow stairs leading up to a door that opened into a long hallway lined with five more closed doors. A desk was at the far end with a plump, dark-haired girl seated behind it. As Rogue walked toward her, the old wood floor creaked making the girl look up from whatever she was reading, though her round face seemed devoid of animation. "May I help you?" she asked in monotone.

Rogue shifted her feet uncertainly. "I've come to...uh, apply."

The girl stiffly handed her a clipboard of paperwork. "Fill this out."

Rogue took it and sat on the worn chair by the desk, plopped her bag on the floor beside it and cast one last glance at the girl. Somehow something didn't feel quite right about her, but seeing she was preoccupied with her magazine, Rogue shrugged it off and studied the first sheet on the clipboard. It explained this as a grant-based research project for studying potential methods of modifying x-factor traits, maybe even eliminating them. Volunteers, if accepted for the program, would be housed and paid a very modest fee for their services. Rogue frowned. She hadn't expected acceptance as a question and her heart fell, but she determinedly signed the consent form anyway and filled out the medical questionnaire that suggested she choose an alias. She decided on Theresa Smith, since Theresa was her middle name and it wouldn't be too strange to answer to, then handed the clipboard back to the girl, who promptly disappeared through one of the doorways. Rogue waited quietly, her eyes anxiously roaming the barren white walls, worried she'd come for nothing.

Dr. Henrietta Pierian, seated behind her office desk, looked-up from her computer screen as her plump assistant entered and handed her the clipboard. She rapidly scanned it, then, with sudden excitement, re-read her new client's mutant gift description more slowly, her eyes glowing yellow. It sounded so similar to the girl Magneto had kidnapped for his machine last year, she could hardly believe it. She nodded to the girl, who left, and composed herself for her visitor, her eyes returning to Pierian's brown ones.

"The doctor will see you now," the girl announced flatly as she stepped into the hall, holding the door for Rogue. Collecting her bag, Rogue stood and went in, her mouth feeling dry as cotton. It was a tiny office lined with shelves of books and a pleasant looking, brown-haired woman behind the desk, who smiled at her and gestured at the worn chair in front of her desk. "Good afternoon. Won't you sit down, uh...." she hesitated, quickly consulting her paperwork, "...Ms Smith. I'm Dr. Henrietta Pierian."

Rogue sat nervously, her eyes roaming the framed medical certificates on the wall behind Dr. Pierian.

"It must be painful for you not to be able to enjoy human contact," the false Dr. Pierian offered, still unable to believe it was the same girl, though she didn't recall the white streaks in Rogue's hair.

Rogue nodded. "Ken you help me?"

Dr. Pierian smiled again. "I'd like to try."

Rogue was relieved. "Good. I was kinda worried about that bein' 'cepted part."

"Oh, we have to say that for our own protection," she assured her, standing. "Come, let's go to the exam-room and get started with the preliminaries."

Rogue smiled, collected her bag and followed her eagerly back into the hallway and through a different door into a medical exam room. It had a simple, paper covered wooden exam table in it's center and a couple metal cabinets along the back wall. Dr. Pierian handed her a set of green scrubs. "Go ahead and put these on. I'll be back in a minute." Then, with an encouraging smile, left.

Closing the exam room door behind her, Mystique hurried into yet another room where a balding, red-headed dwarf lounged on a sofa with a book and styrofoam cup of coffee. "Hypno," she commanded, "it's time to pack up

and clear-out! Right now, today!"

He peered quizzically at her with limpid blue eyes. "Oh? Why now?"

"Because the goose has laid the golden-egg and we can't get caught with it!" He looked at her like she was crazy. "Just do as I say. I'll explain later."

With a nod, he heaved himself to his feet while she smoothed her hair and went back into the exam-room, certain it'd be only a matter of time before Xavier would be on them. She'd accidentally discovered his clever little GPS-tracking chip some months ago when she'd first arrived here posing as a teenage mutant and the real Dr. Pierian conveniently stumbled upon it during her first exam. She'd given the good doctor a convincing explanation, then, later, removed the chip herself and kept it in order to lull Xavier into a false sense of security while she orchestrated her plan. She'd maintained her teenage guise only until she'd become acquainted enough with Pierian's routine to kill her, replace her, then use her clinic as sort of a mutant recruiting station, since confused, young mutants lured by her public notice kept arriving. Then, after sifting through them for those most useful to her purposes, she'd drugged them and handed them over to Hypno to turn into obedient zombies for her using his special brand of telepathic hypnosis. Though, she'd managed to keep her intentions away from Xavier thus far by using Magneto's spare helmet morphed into her identity, she'd still been lacking a suitable diversion to keep him busy while she broke Magneto out, but Rogue now changed all that. Mystique felt certain she could count on Xavier coming after the girl again, but needed to control how and when that happened. Fortunately, she happened to know just how Cerebro worked and just how Rogue's mutant talent worked and had an idea.

Walking cheerfully into the exam room again, she found Rogue changed and seated on the exam table, swinging her legs. Acting as Dr. Pierian, Mystique snapped on a pair of latex gloves, then took Rogue's temperature and blood-pressure and did a basic physical, carefully noting everything in a chart, as if genuine. Then she went to a cabinet along the wall, opened it, filled a syringe from a bottle and returned. "Why don't you lay down?" she soothingly instructed, all smiles.

Rogue eyed the syringe without moving. "What's that fo'?"

"It's the first serum I try on all my mutant patients."

With a dubious nod, Rogue stretched out and Mystique injected her with what was really a paralyzing substance, then watched with satisfaction as Rogue's eyes, first wide with alarm, became glassy and staring and her body no longer under her control. Mystique leaned over her face. "Comfy?" she purred as her smile became a sneer. She patted the top of Rogue's head. "Good. Stay here and I'll be right back."

She went to the other exam room and rolled a gurney from it into Rogue's room, carefully lining it up beside her, then poked her head into the hallway again and signaled her plump assistant to come. When she arrived, Mystique patted the gurney. "Elsie, lay down here." Elsie obeyed complacently without speaking a word, then Mystique, wanting to be sure she had no resistance, injected Elsie with the same paralyzing drug. As soon as Elsie's eyes became glassy, Mystique pulled Rogue's long, protective glove off her forearm then carefully laid Elsie's bare hand on her exposed skin, holding it firmly in place with her own latex protected hand. The effect was immediate. She watched coldly as a wave after wave of contortion swept over her plump assistant and her essence drained rapidly into Rogue until Elsie finally shuddered one last horrible time and went limp, her eyes rolling lifelessly to the ceiling. Mystique quickly checked Elsie with her stethoscope, then, assured she was dead, carelessly flopped the dead girl's arm on her gurney and shoved it away. She sneered down into Rogue's glassy eyes then, sure the chaos of the dead girl's mind mixed with Rogue's would disrupt Xavier's ability to locate her as easily as hanging up on a tele-marketer. She stroked her head with her latex-protected hand. "There, isn't that all better? Now the Professor won't find you until I'm good and ready to let him."

In Westchester, the Professor spent the entire afternoon in Cerebro relentlessly searching for Rogue, but found nothing. Not even the strange voice visited him. He finally gave up, had dinner, then met with Storm and Scott in his office to discuss the results of their student interviews for clues to Rogue's motives or whereabouts.

Storm reported first. "No one knows anything. If anything was bothering her, she didn't say so to anyone."

"Not even Bobby?" Xavier asked.

Storm and Scott both shook their heads.

Xavier sighed, stirring his tea yet again. "Did you check her mail?"

She nodded. "I read every letter she had in her space. Nothing special."

"You can check her account first thing in the morning," Scott suggested, "and see if and where she's been making withdrawals. I'm going to start back-checking what she's been doing on the computers the last month or so with Bobby tonight."

Xavier nodded and Scott rose and left, eager to get started. Drake was meeting him in the library.

Standing to leave also, Storm paused, then drew near Xavier's desk. "It's not your fault," she assured softly. "They're just teenagers trying to figure out how to be grown-up and sometimes running away is part of that."

He forced out an encouraging smile. "Thank you, Storm." She smiled in return and he watched her leave, stirring his cold tea again.

Scott found Bobby leaning against the library door-jam, waiting for him. He handed him the second of two three-inch DSD's as they went in and locked door behind them. Sitting behind the first pair of computers, Scott propped the sign-in book between them as a reference for times and dates Rogue had signed-in for the past six weeks, then they both loaded the DSD's containing Andi's "Garbage" program. It was designed for precisely this sort of date specific hard-drive search and able to restore even deleted files. Unfortunately, they were going to have to go through every PC because Scott hadn't thought to number the computers and make that part of the sign-in, something he was now kicking himself for. "I sure wish I'd numbered these things for sign-in," Scott muttered, already determined to make that policy in the future.

Bobby nodded as he pensively scanned his first screen-full of files. "I wish Marie would've talked to one of us."

"I'm surprised she didn't say something to you. You two have always seemed...uh, extra friendly."

A blush flamed across Bobby's freckled cheeks. "Appearances can be deceiving, I guess."

Scott let himself smile at Drake's embarrassment. "She wasn't one for sharing her problems, was she?"

Bobby shook his head.

"Her gift's a tough one, that's for sure," Scott rambled on. "It'd be nice if we could find something useful for her to do with it."

"What matters," Bobby retorted with sudden feeling, "is she's a person."

"You're right," Scott quickly corrected. "That's what really matters. Our gifts aren't the measure of who we are." He saw Bobby nod, even as he wondered how far he actually believed that. He also envied Bobby. The kid had a real mom and dad. He was here though, for his own protection, because the small, backwater town he'd come from had been dead-set against having any mutants around and they'd saved him from a lynch-mob. Bobby also happened to be one of several students he and the Professor considered prime X-men material and, this summer, they hoped to steer him into ground school, so, someday, he could fly the jet.

The downside of the "Garbage" program was it had to be reset for each date and then, because they didn't know exactly what they were looking for, each file had to be looked over in each PC, making it a very long process. It was after nine before they were done with even the first pair.

"Why don't you call it a night," Scott suggested to Bobby. "I'll see you here tomorrow after breakfast."

Bobby stood and slid his chair under the table. "What about you?"

"I'm going to keep at it awhile longer," Scott replied as he shifted to another PC.

"Okay. See you tomorrow." Bobby left, locking the door behind him.

With no one waiting for him upstairs, Scott wasn't in a hurry to go to bed and didn't quit until, near one am, his burning eyes insisted. He wondered, as he trudged upstairs, how Jean, Andi, Logan and Jubilee were faring and looked forward to her being back, though that wouldn't be for at least another night.

The next morning, as soon as his first hour class was over, Charles Xavier called his bank in Westchester. "Good morning, Mr. Xavier," a cheerful female voice greeted. "What can we do for you?"

"I need to check on some debit transactions for yesterday," he replied, then gave her Marie's account particulars. The bank not only knew him well, but he'd signed as her guardian when they opened the debit account for her.

"Let's see," the woman replied, "I see two transactions. A plane ticket purchase at JFK and a gift-shop purchase at Reagan National Airport. That's all."

"Thank you," Xavier replied, hanging up with a furrowed brow. "Washington DC?" he muttered. "Whatever is she looking for there?" He hummed down to the library and knocked. Bobby peeked out to see who it was. "Hi, Professor," he said, opening the door for him to enter. Xavier rolled in, noting Bobby's tired eyes as watched him re-seat himself behind PC number four. He'd been excused from classes today to help Scott, though Scott was out teaching his math course just now. "Any luck?" Xavier asked.

Bobby shook his head. "Nothing yet."

"Apparently she flew to Washington DC--that might help."

"Why would she go there?" Bobby replied, surprised. "I thought she might have headed for Alaska again ---but DC?"

"She must have some motive," Xavier mused, then smiled encouragingly. "Tell Scott, will you, when he comes back."

Bobby nodded absently and Xavier hummed out. He went immediately underground to Cerebro, eagerly hoping a focused search on the DC area might be more forthcoming, but only returned upstairs for lunch puzzled and disappointed by his continued failure to find her. The voice didn't come again this time either, worrying him as well.

It wasn't until late afternoon that Scott and Bobby found what they were looking for. Actually it was Bobby who found the public announcement for mutant research with it's Washington DC address in a deleted file in PC number seven, viewed by Rogue three weeks earlier. They both stared at it, aghast.

"Print it," Scott ordered. "This stays between me and you unless the Professor decides to tell anyone else."

Bobby nodded as he numbly obeyed, then Scott folded the page and lit out fast for the Professor.

Xavier looked up as Scott tore into his office, knowing even as he entered he'd found her and held out his hand for the paper. Scott handed it to him and Xavier studied it grimly, then looked back up at Scott, aware of his eagerness to do the follow-up. "What's your plan?"

"Take my bike, leave right now, stop overnight in DC and check the clinic first thing in the morning."

Xavier nodded as he handed the paper back. "Be careful."

Scott smirked. "You know me. I'm always careful." Then turning on his heel, Scott strode out the door. Xavier looked after him thinking about Rogue, sorry he couldn't provide the cure he knew she'd hoped for and certain this clinic would also disappoint her.

Scott went upstairs, changed into his most worn and faded jeans, t-shirt and jean jacket, threw a few toiletries into his backpack along with his visor, slipped a worn baseball cap on his head, then, returning downstairs, hunted up Bobby and drew him aside. "I need you to look after things while I'm gone, be in charge."

"Sure," Bobby agreed, clasping Scott's extended hand. "I hope you find her."

Scott nodded, then found Jean in class, gave her a quick kiss goodbye, strode to the garage, straddled his motorcycle, turned his cap around, settled his helmet on his head and headed for DC.

Because of traffic, it took over six hours for him to just reach the northern Belt-way encircling DC and, since it was already early evening, he took the exit for highway 29 at Silver Springs and stopped to grab some dinner, then check into a motel. Early the next morning, he took 29 south, worked his way downtown and, using the public notice's directions, located Dr. Pierian's clinic. Leaving his bike parked a safe distance away, Scott walked to the clinic with his helmet tucked under his arm and his visor hidden inside. He found the same unobtrusive doorway and narrow staircase Rogue had found, but this time there was a hastily scribbled note taped on the door at top that read, "CLOSED." Testing the knob with a gloved hand, he found it locked and, after a backwards glance for any observers, quickly traded his visor for his glasses. Then, adjusting the setting for a fine, thin beam, aimed between the door and door-jam and neatly sheered through the dead-bolt.

Entering the clinic, he carefully pressed the door closed behind him and looked down the long, dark, windowless hallway. Fortunately his gift also allowed him some infrared ability, so he glanced around for a light switch and finding one, flipped it on illuminating five closed doors all on the right and a bare, wooden desk at the far end of the hallway. "Hmm, power is still on," he muttered to himself as he went put his hand on the doorknob of the first door. "Well, let's see what's behind door number one," he said and opened it, flipped the light on and surveyed an unimpressive lounge with a shabby couch, a couple chairs and a card table. Snapping the lights off there, he went to the next, mumbling, "and behind door number two," as he grasped its knob and opened it. He clicked the light on and looked over a ransacked supply closet. "Okay, somebody sure left in a hurry," he noted. "What about door number three?" Opening it, he froze as soon as he flipped on the light and gasped, "Holy Smokes!"

In the middle of the room stood a gurney laden with what was clearly a sheet-covered body and, dangling on line just above it, a tiny, clear zip-lock bag with something in it. He peered cautiously about the rest of the room, surveying the open, ravaged cabinets, cautiously assuring himself no one else was there, then studied the baggie above the body again. "That has to mean something," he said, then looked at the body again unhappily, knowing he had to see if that was Rogue or not. Taking a deep breath, he strode to the gurney, gingerly gripped the top edge of the sheet and peeled it back just far enough to get a look at whoever was there and stared at the plump, purple face of a young girl he didn't know, her dry, blue eyes staring upward at nothing. Grossed out, he immediately dropped the sheet, snatched the little zip-lock bag off the suture needle it hung on, shoved it in his pocket and hurried out of the room certain of two things: Rogue was in deep trouble and he'd be in deep trouble, too, if anyone caught him here right now. He sped up his inspection and hurried to the next room, a tiny office that looked stripped of vital information. Its filing cabinets stood open and empty and the desk had dust patterns indicating a computer, now gone, had once sat there. He scanned the shelves of medical books and framed medical certificates that named Dr. Henrietta Pierian as their owner with a frown, certain no doctor in their right mind would leave them behind. They were too valuable and hard-earned. Setting his helmet carefully on the floor, he sat in desk chair, checked the phone for dial-tone, which it had, then swiftly searched the desk drawers, finding only a few scattered papers and a couple old envelopes with what appeared to be Dr. Pierian's home address. Tucking one of those in his jacket pocket, he collected his helmet and quickly moved on to the last room. Behind that door he just found a mess of shattered glass and broken equipment of what might of been Pierian's lab. He gave the hallway desk a cursory search and, satisfied with his detective work, traded his visor for glasses again, cautiously checked for observers in the stairwell, then slipped quickly out and back to his bike. He didn't remember the baggie until he'd already straddled the bike and paused to pull it from his pocket. Turning it over in his hands, he examined the small micro-chip it contained with puzzlement, sure it'd been left behind for a purpose. He pocketed it again, and set off to check-out Pierian's home address before heading back.

It turned out to be as much a dead end as the clinic. He only found the burnt-out remains of her residence, which meant no one was coming home, so he just wove back to the highway and headed out of town, pondering what meager facts he'd collected. Clearly, the clinic had been emptied out in a hurry, though he seriously doubted Dr. Pierian was responsible. The abandoned medical certificates, books and her burnt residence suggested to him that she, too, was somehow a victim of whoever stole every scrap of the clinic's records, killed the girl and left behind that mysterious micro-chip as a calling card. He guessed it'd all happened within the past twenty four hours, considering the corpse didn't look too bad and the utilities were all still on. The real question, though, was how did this relate to Rogue? Had she arrived before or after these events? If she'd arrived before the clinic was closed, who'd she find there and what'd they do with her? If she arrived after it'd closed, was she still in DC and if so, why couldn't the Professor find her with Cerebro? He couldn't deny the chilling possibility Rogue might also be dead.

When he stopped for lunch on the north side of Baltimore, he called the Professor to tell him his observations, beginning with the body of the strange girl and the baggie containing the micro-chip.

"What'd you say?" Xavier demanded when Scott mentioned the micro-chip.

"I said I found this micro-chip in a transparent baggie hanging over the body on a suture needle," Scott

repeated. There was a heavy silence on the phone. "You know what that means, don't you?"

Xavier heaved a sigh. "I'm afraid I might. It sounds very much like the GPS-tracking chip I allowed Jean and Andi to implant on Mystique when we caught her on the premises earlier this year."

It was Scott's turn to fall silent, angry he hadn't been told. "You tagged Mystique and didn't tell me?"

"I'm sorry Scott. I thought it best at the time." When Scott didn't reply, Xavier added, "Your knowing wouldn't change what has happened."

Still incensed at this infraction against his authority, Scott made himself set it aside, at least for the moment. "Mystique's thumbing her nose at us, leaving that chip, letting us know she's in control and she's got Rogue."

"And that Rogue's life is in her hands," Xavier added softly. "What else did you find?"

"That place was trashed and every record gone. Even Dr. Pierian's computer, but her medical books and certificates were still there. I checked her house and it was burned to the ground. Knowing Mystique, I doubt Dr. Pierian's with us anymore."

"Probably so. Come on home, Scott and we'll talk about it as a team."

"Is Jean back yet?"

"Not yet, but they should be here by the time you get back."

"Okay, I'll be home soon." Scott hung up and hit the road.

It was late afternoon when he finally pulled into the garage and noted the grimy SUV already parked there. He'd barely gotten his kick-stand down when he heard Xavier's voice in his head announce, "We're in my office." Leaving his helmet and gloves, he first went to the Rec-room looking for Bobby, but, when he didn't see him, he waved Nick over. "Where's Drake?" he asked when the tall, dark-haired boy reached him.

"Outside, I think, Mr. Summers." Nick politely replied.

"Do me a favor. Find him and tell him to come to Professor Xavier's office, right now."

"Is he in trouble?"

"No. Just tell him." As Nick walked casually away, Scott called, "And hurry up!" making Nick break into a run.

Scott strode to Xavier's office, making all eyes turned his way as he came in. With Jack out of town, the only team members present were Storm, Jean, Logan and Andi. "So, how much have you told them?" he asked Xavier as he settled next to Jean on the sofa, giving her a quick peck as he threw an arm around her shoulders.

"Everything," Xavier replied.

There was a tap on the door and Bobby Drake popped his head in. "You wanted me?"

Scott waved for him to come in. "Bobby put in so much time helping me, I thought he deserved to be here."

Xavier nodded. Bobby took the wing-chair beside Storm and after a quick glance around the room at the rest, looked directly at Scott. "So, you didn't find her?"

Scott shook his head.

"Did you find anything?" Bobby asked.

"Show Jean the chip." Xavier instructed.

Bobby watched as Scott pulled something plastic from his jean-jacket pocket and handed it to Dr. Grey. Jean eyed it through the plastic and nodded as she rose to pass it to the Professor behind his desk. "It's certainly looks the same."

Xavier set it aside and solemnly tapped something into his keyboard, then surveyed the results on the screen with a snort of disgust. "Well, according to this, Mystique's right here in this room." He picked up the bag and held it up. "It's the one alright." then tossed it aside.

"What is?" Bobby demanded. "And what has it to do with Mystique?" Her name was vile on his tongue. It'd been a real mess getting Rogue to trust him after Mystique had masqueraded as him.

"When she dropped in on us back in March," Xavier explained, "I took Andi's suggestion to try using a GPS-chip to track her movements and okayed Jean implanting it."

"She must have found it," Storm said.

"Ya think?" Logan snorted.

"It was just something to try," Andi interjected quickly. "There weren't any guarantees about how well or how long it'd work."

"What are you talking about?" Bobby demanded.

Xavier held up the plastic bag for Bobby to see. "This was the GPS-chip we implanted in Mystique's arm. This morning, Scott found it hung from a suture at Dr. Pierian's clinic above a dead girl."

"As a message?" Storm asked.

"Yeah, a can't-catch-me message," Scott replied.

The color drained from Bobby's face as he stared at Scott. "You found a dead girl?"

"It wasn't anyone we know," Scott assured.

"Mystique probably has been masquerading as this Dr. Pierian for quite some time," Xavier mused out-loud, his fingers peaked together thoughtfully.

"And it looked like they left in a hurry," Scott added.

"With Rogue," Bobby murmured.

Jean looked at Xavier. "You haven't been able to find her with Cerebro?"

Xavier shook his head. "Nor Mystique."

Logan snorted again. "And why am I not surprised?"

"Rogue is a clever girl." Andi said. "Clever enough to take advantage of our absence to runaway." Then turning to Logan, added, "She wanted to make sure you wouldn't stop her."

Logan gazed into her eyes, not wanting her words to be true, though he knew perfectly well they were. He couldn't keep his promise if Rogue wasn't going to let him. He dropped his arm from the back of the sofa to Andi's shoulders and gave her a gentle squeeze as he pressed his lips against her hair, her sweet scent soothing to his senses.

"I hate to be the one to mention this," Scott interjected, "but we don't know if Rogue is even alive."

Bobby suddenly got up and walked out.

Logan leaned around Andi with flashing eyes to glare at Scott at the other end of the sofa. "She's not dead, you moron!"

Scott returned his glare. "And if you knew anything, you'd know we have to consider all the possibilities of any problem."

Logan came to his feet and pointed at Scott, "I know one thing, I know you're a ..." but stopped with a wince at Xavier's loud command in his head to "Stop it." Scott, likewise, winced for the same reason.

"That will be quite enough!" Xavier commanded out-loud, drawing everyone's full attention again, though Logan remained standing, arms crossed stubbornly on his chest. "First of all," Xavier said firmly, "I don't believe Rogue is dead, at least not yet. She's far too valuable to Mystique as a tool to use against us." Xavier noted Scott's averted gaze and tightened jaw. "Secondly," he continued, "I'm certain breaking Magneto out of prison is her primary agenda, though exactly how her activities at the clinic or Rogue fit into that is yet to be seen." Glancing over his team's tired faces, he ended the session. "That will be all for today."

Storm was out of her chair first and at his desk. "I think I should find and talk to Bobby."

He nodded. "Please and ask him not to say more to the other students than we couldn't find Rogue." Opening his mind, he located him for her. "He's headed for the gazebo."

She nodded and fell in behind Andi and Logan walking out the door ahead of her.

Xavier watched Scott escort Jean to the door, whisper something, then send her out, perfectly aware anger as hot as lava seethed under his young leaders cool facade. He hummed out from behind his desk to facilitate a more informal environment for a conversation he sensed wasn't going to be an easy one.

Closing the door, Scott faced his mentor stiffly as a soldier, his hands clasped icily behind his back..

Xavier indicated the sofa. "Why don't you sit down?"

"I'd rather stand, thank-you."

"Alright. What's on your mind?"

"You mean you haven't read it?"

Xavier patiently peaked his fingers together as he shook his head. "I'd rather you tell me."

"Okay, I want to know who I am around here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean am I really the leader of this team and do I have any real authority or am just I some kind of puppet?"

Xavier recognized a catch-22 in Scott's question. He'd be wrong no matter how he replied, so he instead replied with a different question. "What's happened to make you ask?"

"Alright, if you want to play that way," Scott replied, then held up two fingers and counted them off. "You've withheld significant X-team related information from me and repeatedly contradicted my authority in front of the team."

"And by significant information you mean the micro-chip and Mystique?"

"If I'm really the team leader, then anything that's even remotely related to the team, to the Brotherhood or with mutants in general is my business," Scott asserted, laterally slicing his hand across the air for emphasis. "No exceptions."

"I'm sorry, Scott. I'll make a point of keeping you fully informed in the future. Now, when did I defy your authority?"

"Five minutes ago for starters. I said we needed to consider all aspects of Rogue being missing, including her being dead, then Logan disagreed and you agreed with him."

"Ah." Xavier was watching Scott's hands flying expressively as he talked.

"I wasn't saying she was dead or that I wanted her dead, I was just said it was a *possibility*."

"And I've disagreed with you like this repeatedly?"

"Yes, sir. Ever since Logan first arrived. First, you insisted I take him to rescue Rogue, despite my disagreement, then you also took his side during that briefing after I was burned last summer and now this." Scott folded his arms to his chest. "Just once I'd like to hear you tell Logan I'm right and to shut-the-heck-up."

Xavier tapped his fingers thoughtfully against his lips a moment as he studied his flushed, X-team leader. "I'm sorry it always appears I'm taking Logan's side against you, Scott. Tell me, what should I do if it's I who disagrees with your point of view?"

Scott was silent several heartbeats. "Well, I guess you should say so."

"And what if my opinion coincidentally coincides with Logan's opinion?" Xavier observed Scott drop his crossed arms and thrust his hands into his pockets sullenly.

"Are you saying I'm mis-reading this?"

"I am." Xavier watched Scott's gaze drop to the floor as he struggled to reconcile this new information. Xavier said, "Do you really believe I'd give more weight to Logan's opinion than yours?"

Scott's gaze came back to him, hesitating significantly before finally answering, "No, sir."

Xavier felt Scott hesitated a bit too long, but it'd have to do for now. "Your feelings *are* valid, Scott, and I'm truly sorry I've hurt them. Is there anything else?"

"No, sir, I guess that's it," and pulling his hands from his pockets, Scott turned to leave.

"Scott," Xavier said, making him pause and turn back. "If I should ever disagree with Logan, I'll have no qualms about telling him he's wrong, believe me." That got only a faint smile and nod, then his young leader was out the door.

At the same time Scott was in the office with Xavier, Storm headed across the lawn for the old band gazebo tucked among ancient oaks dressed now in autumn colors. She found Bobby Drake already seated inside, his arms spread along the seat back on either side, feet stretched out on the deck, gazing around at the nest-littered roof. She paused at the steps and cleared her throat making him glance her way with a start. "May I join you?" she asked.

"I guess so." He resumed his study of the holes in the roof.

Storm hopped up the steps and sat on the circular bench across from him. Bobby's curly hair and freckles often reminded her of Alex, though Alex's were blonde curls. "I'm sorry about happened in there," she offered. "Scott

didn't mean it like it sounded."

Bobby leveled his gaze at her. "I know."

"The Professor is pretty sure Marie's still alive."

"Oh? What makes him think that?"

Storm hesitated. "Well, because of Mystique. He thinks she will want to use her against us."

Bobby heaved a deep sigh and rolled his eyes heavenward. "I can't believe that of all the places she could have gone, she picked the *one* place where Mystique was."

Storm didn't reply. It was, indeed, a remarkable coincidence, but saying so wouldn't help, so she tried a new tact. "You care a lot about her, don't you?"

He sighed again. "Ever since we first met."

"Does she know?"

He held his hand level in the air and fluttered it in a maybe-or-maybe-not gesture.

"Have you tried telling her?"

"She won't let me. She avoids the topic."

"She's afraid," Storm asserted. "She doesn't accept herself as she is."

"I don't suppose she'll accept anyone caring for her until she accepts herself."

"Unfortunately, I think that's right." She checked her watch, then stood. "If you're alright, I'll be going in."

"I'm alright. Just frustrated."

She gave him an encouraging smile, took two steps away, then paused and turned back. "Oh, the Professor said not to mention the details of what we know about Rogue to the other students."

Bobby nodded. "Yeah, okay," and Storm headed back to the main building.

When Scott came out of Xavier's office, he found Jean seated on the old pew in the hallway, lovely nyloned legs crossed, patiently waiting for him as he'd asked. She hopped up as soon as he came out, her eyes immediately searching his face. "Is everything alright between you and Charles?"

He smiled reassuringly. "Everything's fine, all talked out." He slid his arm around her waist, pulling her close. "How bout you? How was the trip?"

"Long and tiring," she replied, sliding her arm around his waist as they strolled down the hallway, happy to be home. "Logan was a little impatient with Jubilee taking so long getting ready this morning."

He chuckled. "Logan, impatient? What else is new?"

"And Andi stayed with me and Jubilee in our room and not with Logan."

"Huh. Did you ask her about it?"

Jean looked at him with surprise. "Certainly not!"

"But you're girls---you didn't even trade some girl-talk about it?"

"No, I'm just telling you because you're always the one worried about Logan taking advantage of her and I told you that wouldn't happen." They'd reached the stairwell by then.

"I guess it proves you're right," he murmured in her ear. Though it did raise Logan a notch in his estimation, it wasn't foremost on his mind just now. At the top of the stairs, since no one was around, he pulled Jean to him and kissed her neck. Giggling, she wiggled free and dashed down the hall to their room with him on her heels in a little mock chase that ended as soon as he locked the door behind him.

The next day, after lunch, Scott delivered the school mail to Xavier's office. "You'd better look at this first," he said, handing Xavier a plain envelope that had no return address and "*Professor Charles Xavier*" neatly scrawled on the front. Xavier noted the Hawaiian postmark, then opened it while Scott looked on curiously beside him. He removed and unfolded a eight-by-ten piece of paper. It had a large, meticulous spider web drawn on it in pencil as a background with the following words printed in the middle: **Tau Omega International, Zurich, Switzerland** and a web-site address with a huge question mark scribbled beside it. It was signed, "*Hezekiah*" with a postscript

that read, *"Please remember to call on Mr. Weir for anything you need."*

Xavier looked at Scott with a raised brow.

"So," Scott replied, taking the paper and studying it. "Mr Lei thinks this might be the Spider's organization, huh?"

"Why don't you and Andi look into that."

"Where is she right now?"

Xavier frowned faintly as he mentally scanned for her. "Underground, on the computer,"

Scott nodded and left.

Continued in "With This Ring"