

Sum of the Individual Parts

Chapter 1 Homecoming	2
Chapter 2 The Parts	12
Chapter 3 Acceptance	23
Chapter 4 The Truth	32
Chapter 5 The Whole Truth.....	44
Chapter 6 Nothing But the Truth	60
Chapter 7 Confrontation.....	71
Chapter 8 Living On.....	82
Chapter 9 Epilogue.....	90

Author: Beren (Beren@dtwins.co.uk) (beren_writes at LJ)

Website: <http://www.plotbunny.co.uk>

Fandom: Mutant X

Pairing: Shalimar/Brennan, Shalimar/Jesse/Brennan

Rating: NC17/18

Disclaimer: This story is based on characters and situations created and owned Marvel Studios, Tribune Entertainment and Fireworks Entertainment. No money is being made and no copyright infringement is intended.

Warnings/Spoilers: explicit sexual situation, assumes season 3 did not happen

Summary: The team think Jesse is dead; killed by a fatal shot to the back, only there are things going on they could not possibly have predicted. Jesse isn't dead, but is he really Jesse any more?

Author's Notes: Thanks to Soph for the beta. This fic has been languishing on my hard drive for years, requiring three scenes to finish it, well I finally wrote them :).

Word Count: ~42,360

Chapter 1 Homecoming

"You have no idea how much of a surprise it was to me to find out that moleculars were the most likely to survive my procedures," the voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. "My initial data suggested that ferals would be far more likely to survive the emotional and physical trauma, but in practice their genetic structure simply breaks down. I've had much more success with moleculars and the stronger the mutation the more likely the subject is to survive. I have high hopes for you, My Dear, very high hopes..."

There was a sudden pain like a pinprick and coldness; bone-numbing coldness that spread through every muscle. But that was not the worst; after the cold came the heat and the heat felt like liquid fire in every cell.

Jesse opened his eyes with a start and realised that he had fallen asleep in the corner of the warehouse where he had taken refuge from the rain. He was shivering from the damp and he did not discount the possibility that he was in the first stages of fever. The dream image lingered in his mind and he couldn't shake the fear that he was beginning to hallucinate.

He was not sure how he had reached the warehouse district; he didn't even know what city he was in, and he was not sure what images from his mind were real and what were nightmares. Jesse had woken up when the storm had started pelting him with water and what was really scary was that he had been walking at the time.

The last thing he remembered clearly was going to a club with Brennan and then loosing the elemental mutant to the charms of a stunning blonde. Someone at the bar had started a fight, Jesse had felt something hit him in the back and then it was all a blank.

Remembering the dream, Jesse checked his arms for any sign of the needle marks or other abrasions, but they looked perfectly normal. It was all so confusing and all that he knew was he had to return to Sanctuary. Adam would know what was real and what was fever hallucination and at Sanctuary he would be safe.

With a determined effort, Jesse pulled himself to his feet and found that his legs were even more unstable than when he had first sat down. The grubby t-shirt and jeans he was wearing had not done much to keep out the weather and even out of the rain it was still cold. Jesse's communicator was gone and so there was only one thing to do; he had to find a phone.

====

Adam watched his younger colleagues as they sat around the recreation area in silence. The other three had barely spoken a word since all four of them had returned to Sanctuary and Adam would have been lying if he had said he was not worried about them. The whole situation had hit them very hard and the black they were all wearing reflected their mood perfectly. Brennan and Shalimar were sitting close to each other, the tragedy having brought them together in their grief; Emma was a few feet away and, from the cold look in her eyes, she was attempting to shut out everything around her.

Adam was not sure who would be the first to crack, but he would be glad when something made it through the facades. The funeral had been hard on them all

and the fact that Jesse's mother had all but accused them of killing her son had not helped the matter. He had done everything he could to bring Jesse back from the coma caused by the bullet to the back, but there had been no brain wave activity at all and eventually even he had had to stop trying. A week and a half had passed since then, two weeks since the incident itself and it had taken so much out of Mutant X.

Adam was trying to decide if there was anything he could do when the terminal he was standing next to beeped gently to let him know someone was calling. Very few people had the number and anyone ringing would have a good reason so, turning away from the rest of his team, he walked into the next room and answered the communication.

"Adam," he spoke quietly, but firmly.

There was a moment's silence from the other end and just the sound of someone taking a breath.

"Amm...need help," was the eventual mumbled response.

The voice sounded vaguely familiar, but Adam's mind refused to tell him who it was through the distortion of whatever distress the caller was in. Thinking quickly Adam decided on a course of action; he moved back to the door and waved at the other three.

"Brennan, use the computers to trace this call," he instructed quickly, "someone is in trouble," he added when he saw the vague resentment on the other man's face.

Brennan did not look happy, but he did as he was told and the two women rose to their feet as well. The pair did not follow their male colleague into the computer area, but they were watching as he worked.

"Hello," Adam spoke back at the caller, "can you tell me where you are?"

There was another pause.

"Don't know," the man eventually replied with a definite slur in his voice.

There was something very familiar about the voice, but there were more important things to worry about than identifying the caller; Adam was afraid that he might lose the young man before he had time to locate him.

"Do you know the number you're calling from?" Adam asked calmly knowing that if Brennan's trace failed he was the only chance of finding the caller.

"Mmmm," the man on the other end of the phone sounded very confused, "can't read ... eyes hurt. Help, Adam ... please."

At the sound of his name pronounced properly Adam went very cold; he finally recognised the voice. His rational brain told him it could not possibly be true, he had watched Jesse die, and he had run every test he knew how on the body to be sure. Now he was shocked into silence.

"Adam," the voice pleaded quietly.

When he glanced up, Emma was looking at him; she obviously felt his confusion. The question in her eyes broke his immobility and he put his doubt aside.

"Jesse, it's alright, I'm still here," he said firmly and Brennan looked up from where he was typing with a very startled look on his face.

Shalimar had also heard him use the name, because she was through the door like a shot with Emma close behind. Adam held up his hand for silence before anyone could say anything.

"We're tracing the call, Jesse," the scientist said with far more calm in his voice than he felt.

So many possibilities were running through his mind from elaborate plots to the terrible mistake he must have made, but Adam shoved them all aside for the task in hand.

"Do you know what happened to you, Jesse?" he asked evenly without letting any emotion into his voice.

His logical, scientific brain kept telling him Jesse was dead, that the battery of tests he had run on the body to make sure had been fool proof, but his very human side hoped that this was real. All the anger and grief of the last two weeks would be over and the family would be whole again.

"Got him," Brennan announced before Jesse replied.

"Can't remember," was the quiet reply from the other end of the line. "In a clu..." the voice trailed off for a moment, "s'mthing hit me."

"We're coming to get you, Jesse," Adam said evenly. "Stay where you are. I'm going to leave Shalimar to talk to you and the rest of us are going to the Helix. We'll be there soon."

No one argued and Mutant X went into action smoothly.

=====

Adam had little idea how long the flight took, he had had far too many other things to think about, especially when Jesse had stopped talking. They landed as close to the coordinates Brennan had found as possible and then they ran the rest of the way. What Adam saw made his heart jump into his throat. Laying half in and half out of a phone booth was an all too familiar figure in a position not unlike one in which Adam had seen him far too recently. Brennan reached the prone young man first and knelt down.

"Don't touch him," Adam called out quickly, far too aware that they could all be in danger at every turn.

The scientist reached his younger friends and held out the mobile scanner. Jesse was half curled into a foetal ball and he was shivering; he gave no sign that he knew they were there.

"He's hurting, Adam," Emma said desperately, "we have to help him."

"And we will," he assured her calmly as he watched the readings fly up the scanner, "but first I have to make sure Jesse is not a danger to us."

Both Brennan and Emma watched him intently as Adam finished his initial scan. When nothing immediately dangerous showed up, he nodded at the other two.

"Let's get him back to Sanctuary," he said pointedly, "someone has been playing with his DNA and I need to stabilise it."

Brennan needed no other encouragement and without any help from the other two he lifted Jesse into his arms.

"Let's go," he said firmly.

====

Adam walked away from his instruments with a quick glance at the motionless Jesse as he walked over to the other three. He had been working all night to stabilize Jesse and his tests had confirmed his darkest suspicions.

"The body is a clone," he eventually said quietly. "My tests were not wrong, we buried what was left of Jesse's body yesterday."

"No," Emma said almost instantly, "that's Jesse I can feel him, no clone would feel exactly like him."

Adam held up his hand before anyone else could join in the protest.

"I said the body was a clone," he told them using his calm, detached, clinical tone. "My tests also confirm what Emma knows; someone transferred Jesse's consciousness into the clone. That's not Jesse's original body, but it is Jesse."

Shalimar's eyes flashed yellow in fury and Brennan looked like he was about to explode; only Emma appeared remotely rational as she used her rigid self-control as a shield. Adam had seen the hope flare in his team as they re-found their lost comrade and he prayed this would not tear them apart further.

"But why?" the telepath asked evenly. "What is the point of stealing someone's mind and putting it in a cloned body. And how? He's only been gone two weeks: it's not possible."

Taking a deep breath, Adam tried to put his racing thoughts into an order that would mean something to the others; the ideas were so incredible that even he was having trouble dealing with them.

"I don't know how; his cells show very few of the normal signs of cloning. I can't even begin to explain the process used," he admitted eventually. "The genetic structure is basically Jesse's, but the cloned body was further engineered. In fact his genetic structure is still in flux. Whoever did this to Jesse was still changing him after they transferred his consciousness. I've stabilised him as well as I can, but I don't know if I can bring his mutation under control."

"What were they trying to do to him?" Shalimar asked tightly.

"It appears somebody wants another super-mutant," Adam told them candidly, "and they used Jesse's genetic code as a foundation. As far as I can tell someone

believed that starting with a stable mutation and building on it would give them a stable super-mutant. More detailed tests will give me a better idea of what's been added and then I'll have a better chance of bringing our Jesse back."

There was a moment's silence as the team let the implication hang.

"And if you can't?" Brennan finally voiced what they were all thinking.

"Jesse's genetic structure will break down," Adam said quietly, "he'll die."

Shalimar gave a growl of frustration and anger and turned on her heel to stalk out of the room. Adam wished it was as easy for him to express his dismay and fury at the situation, but he maintained his calm exterior.

"I'll go make sure she doesn't destroy anything valuable," Brennan said as if he was unsure he wanted to leave, and Adam nodded at him.

It was obvious that the whole situation was making the elemental mutant very uncomfortable and Adam had no intention of making it any harder for his team than it already was. The tall dark man followed his teammate out the door which left just Emma with Adam.

"Can you save him?" the telepath asked candidly.

"I don't know," Adam replied honestly, since it was pointless lying to his companion. "I have never seen anything quite like this; I'm amazed he's still alive."

Emma nodded as if she had suspected this all along.

"What can I do?" she asked practically.

=====

Jesse opened his eyes slowly and blinked blankly at the bright blob above him. It took a moment or two before it resolved into a recognisable light and Jesse's brain caught up with the idea of consciousness. He vaguely remembered being wet and cold and now he was warm, dry and comfortable which was a nice change. At that moment Jesse really could not be bothered about anything else and he just lay there for a while. There was a noise to his right and reluctantly he moved his head to find out what was causing it; he came face to face with Emma.

"Hi Jesse," she said with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, "I felt you wake up."

"Mmm," was the closest Jesse could come to a coherent reply.

It was then that Jesse began to notice that he was not quite connected to the world correctly. His body was responding, but not as well as it should have been and this filled him with a sudden fear.

"It's okay, Jesse," Emma said soothingly and he felt her mental touch, "you're safe. Adam gave you some medication to help you relax, it's just making you groggy."

The waves of calm the telepath was projecting into his mind had some effect on him and he calmed down a little, but the whole situation still filled him with irrational anxiety. The lab scared him at a very deep level and he didn't know why. Even under Emma's influence he couldn't stop his heart pounding and he felt the absurd need to get away.

"Adam," he heard Emma call, "Jesse's awake."

Adam appeared from somewhere else in the room and entered Jesse's peripheral vision. He was carrying something in his hands and the sight sent Jesse over the edge into full-blown panic. Logic told him there was nothing to be afraid of, but his instinct went crazy and terror replaced any rational thought, flooding his system with adrenaline.

"Jesse, it's okay, no one is going to hurt you," Emma's words made it into his mind, but they did nothing to help him.

Jesse needed to get away, but his muscles wouldn't respond properly. He tried to move, but he could barely lift his body from the couch on which he was lying. Pure, unadulterated fear pulsed through every fibre of his being and panic took over. Jesse reached for his power's instinctively as his last line of defence, but his mind filled with blinding pain. It was like grabbing hold of a live wire and all he could do was scream.

Emma saw Jesse arch off the recliner and phase as he did so. The cry he let past his lips was almost as stunning as the mental scream of agony that accompanied it and if she had not been prepared it would have taken her along for the ride. As it was, all her defences were in place and she felt Jesse's pain, but was not overcome by it. When Jesse's body relaxed out of the arch he did not stop moving and convulsed on the couch.

"Emma, stand away," Adam instructed firmly.

All Emma wanted to do was help her friend, but she did as she was told. As she removed herself from the vicinity, Adam engaged the DNA sequencer and blue light bathed Jesse's pain wracked form. The convulsion died away slowly and left a semi-conscious, exhausted Jesse limp in their wake. Emma moved forward again as soon as the scanner beams cut off.

"Jesse," she said with far more calm than she felt, "it's Emma. You're safe, you're home."

She had tried to calm him with a psionic pulse before and it had barely made any difference. She did not want to try again in case that had had anything to do with Jesse's attack, so she chose the old fashioned method. With one hand she reached out and brushed the damp hair from his forehead.

"Everything is going to be okay," she soothed gently. "Just relax."

Adam walked over, much more slowly this time, but Jesse did not seem to be in any state to notice him. Jesse appeared to be almost delirious.

"His powers are out of control," Adam said quietly, "try and keep him calm. I need to run some tests before I can do any more."

Emma simply nodded; she was going to stay as long as it took.

=====

Time was a relative concept and there was little in Jesse's world to relate it to. The world drifted by in a haze, never quite making sense and was alternately painful and peaceful. From time to time he recognised a face or a voice, but it was mostly just a jumble of nonsense that floated around him. He had the odd lucid moment, but they lasted only seconds and usually ended in anxiety or pain.

When Jesse finally returned to a world that made sense, it took time for his mind to adjust to constant input. Something in him recognised the lab at Sanctuary and he could feel the pleasant sensation of the DNA scanner. It cut off just as he opened his eyes. For a moment he simply lay there trying to gather his thoughts and then he moved his head to the side to see if he could see who was running the scanner. To his pleasure he found that his body responded in the way he expected, if somewhat reluctantly. Jesse could just about see Emma out of the corner of his eye as she punched some keys.

"So will I live?" he asked in a voice that came out much more quietly than he had intended.

"Jesse," came the delighted reply and very rapidly Emma was standing beside him smiling down, "you're awake."

He smiled back, although his body felt as if it didn't want to agree.

"I'll get back to you on that when the rest of me catches up," he replied lightly.

"Not feeling so hot?" Emma asked sympathetically.

"If asked to guess I'd say there was a meat grinder in my recent past," Jess told her with a grin. "Care to tell me why I feel like someone put me back together without the instructions?"

At that comment he saw Emma's expression change slightly; she covered quickly, but Jesse had seen the shadow dart across her eyes.

"You don't remember?" she asked with a cheerfulness that belied what he had just seen.

He shook his head; his memory was empty of an explanation.

"What is the last thing you can recall?" Emma continued calmly.

With a frown Jesse tried to bring his scattered thoughts under control; it was not the easiest thing he had ever done.

"We all went out," he said slowly as he struggled with his memory, "and Brennan and I ditched you and Shal to go to a club. That's it except for some flashes of faces."

"That was a little over three weeks ago, Jesse," Emma said gently, resting a hand on his arm. "You were attacked at the club."

The idea seemed preposterous; it couldn't have been three weeks, it felt like yesterday.

"No way," he voiced his opinion.

"Yes way," Emma replied sympathetically. "We let you out of our sight for a few hours and you went and managed to get yourself kidnapped."

"Brennan?" Jesse asked quickly as it suddenly occurred to him that he had not been alone when attacked.

"Oh Brennan's too big and too stupid for anyone to worry about him," Emma said with perfect timing as the elemental walked into the lab.

"Hey, I resent that," Brennan said with a mock hurt expression. "So the sleeper awakes."

Brennan's tone was just a little bit too cheery as far as Jesse was concerned and something felt off about the whole situation.

"Why was I asleep for three weeks?" he asked evenly and unsuccessfully tried to catch one of his companion's eyes.

"Well technically we don't know if you were asleep all the time," Brennan said irreverently, "we lost you for nearly two of those. Careless I know, but do you know how many guys there are out there who are short, blond and answer to the name Jesse?"

"I am not short," Jesse shot back, even as he did so, realising that he had been suckered into joking about the situation. "You're just too tall."

Someone had obviously done something Jesse had missed because Adam came strolling into the room as if he knew exactly what he would find.

"Welcome back, Jesse," Adam said cheerfully, "how are you feeling?"

"Wiped and a little sore," he responded, giving the honest truth.

"Not surprising given the circumstances," Adam continued before Jesse had a chance to go on. "We should run a few tests now you're awake to make sure everything's ticking over properly."

Jesse knew when he was being snowed and now was not a time he was willing to play along.

"Adam, what's going on?" he asked pointedly. "What subject is everyone avoiding?"

That brought all three to a halt; they all looked like kids who had been caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

"Jesse there are some things that you will need to know," Adam said carefully, "but we'd prefer it if you waited until you were stronger."

"Would you want to wait?" he replied and gave his friend an even stare. "You three are dancing around me like I might bite."

Emma placed a supportive hand on Jesse's shoulder and he had the distinct impression he was not going to like what was coming.

"Where was I, Adam?" he asked pointedly. "What had they done to me? How did you get me out?"

"We don't know where you were," Adam acquiesced eventually, "we didn't rescue you."

"We thought you were dead," Emma added quietly.

"Then how?" Jesse was confused.

"You rescued yourself, Jesse," Adam continued evenly. "You called us, just after ..."

The way his mentor paused did not reassure Jesse at all.

"After the funeral," Brennan finished what Adam seemed reluctant to say.

Jesse just lay there for a moment trying to take in what his friends were saying. They had thought he died; they had even had a funeral.

"Why?" he finally asked. "Why were you so sure?"

"We had a body, Jesse," Brennan seemed to be the designated storyteller. "There was a fight at the club; people with guns. I found what I thought was you shot in the back."

It was so far out there that Jesse totally believed him without question, but so many possibilities jumped into his mind.

"A fake?" he asked tentatively, not that Jesse could imagine what kind of fake could fool Adam.

No one seemed to know what to say and ghosts of memories flitted around Jesse's head, making him more than a little uneasy.

"Jesse," Adam said in a totally neutral tone, "the body we buried was not a fake."

The statement was so impossible that it took a moment for Jesse to figure out what Adam was saying. When he did, his chest felt suddenly tight and he looked down at himself not really sure what to think.

"Someone cloned you," Adam was speaking slowly and calmly, "and then they took your consciousness and put it in the new body."

Jesse wasn't really hearing him anymore as complete denial set in. It was not true, it was pure fiction; things like that were impossible. People could not take your soul and drag it into another shell; it was beyond even Adam's science. Jesse shrank away from the knowledge and tried to refuse to believe, but then his mind threw him something else. There was a dim pain and then nothing but darkness; cold, imprisoning darkness where there should have been warmth and freedom. He was trapped, without form, without sensation and it was the most horrific sensation Jesse could possibly imagine.

"Jesse," Emma's voice broke through the memory and he found himself looking directly into the telepath's eyes. "It's not real," she said gently, "it's the past. You're not alone anymore."

So much pain and anguish welled up inside Jesse that it overwhelmed him almost instantly. How was he supposed to deal with this.

"I can feel your pain, Jesse," Emma said quietly, "just let it out. You can release it now."

It was all the push he needed.

"It can't be," he whispered slowly, "it can't be."

But the denial did not ring true and he reached for the comfort Emma offered before the pain took everything away. Emma enfolded him in her arms and he sobbed uncontrollably.

=====

Jesse appeared to be sleeping peacefully after his emotional outburst and Adam took the time to check the readings from the young man. Mutant abilities had a lot to do with emotion as well as the physical and any shock to his system could be dangerous to Jesse in his current state. To Adam's relief the revelations about his recent past did not appear to have done any damage to the young mutant.

When they had first brought Jesse to Sanctuary, Adam had had to constantly stabilise his genetic structure, but now the scanner was programmed to run once every two hours. By degrees the damage done to the Jesse's DNA was being brought under control and Adam was confident that he could bring his friend back from the edge.

The reasoning and actual science behind the alterations made to Jesse were, however, still somewhat of a mystery. No technique the geneticist knew could have produced a clone like Jesse's new body. The accelerated growth should have left cellular scarring, but it was almost as if Jesse's body had formed naturally, just not quite. Adam was the foremost expert on new mutants and he could not explain exactly how the cloning had been achieved. Finding out who had done this and how and why were Adam's foremost priorities.

End of Chapter 1

Chapter 2 The Parts

Jesse felt that he was spending an inordinate amount of time sleeping, but Adam kept trying to reassure him that it was perfectly normal considering what his body was going through. It had been three days since he had woken up properly, but his strength was returning only gradually. At least he could now make it to the bathroom on his own, but that was as far as his exertions went at the moment.

It gave him a great deal of time to think and he vaguely remembered his first awakening in Sanctuary now, but he could no more explain it now than he could then. He remembered the fear, but he did not know what had caused it. It was frustrating to say the least to have a hole in his memory for such a significant part of his life. Jesse would have liked nothing better than to find the bastard who had wrecked his DNA and take his revenge, but he had no information to go on.

His comfort in all this were the other members of Mutant X. Whenever he needed someone to talk to or just some company, one of them would be there. Adam was around the most, often running tests or making sure Jesse was okay. The leader of Mutant X was closely followed by Emma and Jesse had the sneaking suspicion that the psionic was keeping a mental eye on him all the time. The way someone would always turn up to cheer him up was becoming a little suspicious. Shalimar and Brennan had been around less, but for that Jesse was quite glad; they were both a bright point when they did show up, but Jesse did not have enough energy to keep up with either of them at the moment.

Jesse was trying to read a book Brennan had leant him without much success. It wasn't that the plot wasn't engaging it was just that it took far more concentration than he could muster at the moment. Reading required focus and that was not something Jesse had a lot of to spare; his mind kept drifting. After he had started the same page four times, he finally closed the book and sighed, rubbing his eyes as he did so.

"Not in the mood?" asked a voice from the door and Jesse looked up to see Shalimar standing there smiling.

"Concentration is shot to hell," Jesse replied returning her greeting with a half-smile.

"At least you have an excuse," his friend said lightly and walked into the room. "So you want the good news or the bad news?"

From the expression on Shalimar's face Jesse doubted that the bad news was particularly bad, but paranoia was something he was quite good at these days so he frowned anyway.

"Good news," he said a little dubiously.

His companion beamed at him with an I-know-something-you-don't-know grin. She left him hanging for a while, but when Jesse glared at her she caved.

"How do you fancy spending the night in your own room," she said cheerfully.

Jesse's mood brightened instantly; he had been confined to the lab since he had awoken and getting back to his own space would be fantastic.

"Really?" he asked, incredibly pleased.

"Of course, really," Shalimar replied, "Adam gave the okay this afternoon. As of tomorrow you only have to show up here twice a day for a tune up. You're officially free."

The smile that graced Jesse's face now was completely genuine. Then something occurred to him.

"What's the bad news?" he asked slowly.

"You have to get there," his friend replied mischievously.

Jesse found himself laughing at that. That was one hurdle he did not mind overcoming.

"Can we go now?" he asked, his enthusiasm bubbling over.

He felt like a kid at Christmas, but he couldn't help himself. Shalimar nodded.

"Whenever you like," she told him warmly.

Jesse did not need any more prompting and he swung his legs off the couch, dropping onto the floor quickly. It was as he stood up that he realised in his enthusiasm he had taken things a little too fast; his vision popped with stars and he swayed precariously. Shalimar was there to support him instantly.

"Hey, superman," she said quickly, "take it a bit slower; no jumping tall buildings just yet."

As his equilibrium returned Jesse grinned.

"Yes ma'am," he said with mock seriousness.

It took the pair longer than Jesse cared to admit to make it to his room. They had to stop three times for him to rest and, by the time they finally made it, Jesse was exhausted. He sat on his bed gratefully as Shalimar rifled in his draws to find him some of his own clothes. She presented him with a T-Shirt and some boxers which he took gratefully.

"Can you manage or do you want some help?" she asked with a mischievous smile.

"Let me think," Jesse replied in kind, "ah, I think I can manage."

Shalimar laughed and then she headed for the door.

"Call if you need anything," she said as she disappeared.

Jesse looked at the clothes in his hand and considered if he could be bothered to change. A second or so later Shalimar's head re-appeared round the doorframe again.

"Anything," she said with a very serious look in her eyes and then she was gone.

Finally alone, Jesse collapsed back onto the bed and just lay there for a while. It had only been a short walk and yet he was completely wiped out. Adam had

explained that the fluctuations in his genetic structure were taking all of his energy and that the more they had those under control the better he would feel, but that didn't stop it from being annoying. Staring at the ceiling, Jesse decided he was not going to give in and slowly he sat back up. With the last of his strength he stood up and pushed down the shorts he had been wearing in the lab. Then he sat back down and slowly pulled on his regular underwear. Unable to make his legs work to stand up a second time, he was reduced to manoeuvring until he had them on properly. Then Jesse pulled the T-shirt over his head and finally relaxed back onto the bed gratefully.

It felt good to be back in a real bed. Pulling his feet up onto the covers, he rolled over, curled up and let the desire to sleep take him. He had no strength to climb under the sheets and he drifted off where he was lying.

As Jesse fell asleep, Shalimar put her head back round the door; she had been waiting for his breathing to even out. Just now she was feeling very motherly and, although she had not wanted to embarrass Jesse by hanging around, she had not been willing to just leave either.

Very quietly she walked back into the room and picked up the blanket that was sat at the end of the bed. Then with great care she covered Jesse with it, making sure not to wake him as she did so. Satisfied that he was as comfortable as he was going to get, she calmly turned and, this time, really left.

=====

It had been nearly two weeks since Adam had released him from the lab and in that time Jesse's requirement for treatment had reduced down to once a day. All that time he hadn't been back to full speed and Adam had made him promise that he would not attempt to use his powers in any way, shape or form. He had basically just been hanging around most of the time. Practicing his focusing techniques to regain his equilibrium had taken up some of his days, but you couldn't meditate all the time, and surfing the net had become old very fast.

The others had been around too, but Mutant X didn't just stop because Jesse was out of action, so they had been busy a lot. Boredom had set in quite quickly. Jesse had been so bored that he had even tried doing chores, but had found out quite quickly that not quite being up to full strength went down to completely zapped if he did too much. Any form of exercise had been pretty much the same; and it had taken patience and time to build back his fitness. That was why he had been incredibly glad when Adam had decided it was time to try out his powers; that was until he actually thought about it in detail.

Jesse stood in the middle of the makeshift lab area he and Adam had constructed in one of the empty storage rooms, looking at his companion dubiously. They had decided that testing Jesse's powers was done best away from the main Sanctuary area just in case. He had sensors stuck to various parts of his body and he was more than a little nervous. He hadn't used his powers consciously since the day he was taken and now that he was here he was very unsure about using them. Adam had told Jesse that the treatments had his genetic fluctuations stabilised, but actually using his powers after such dramatic upheaval was more than a little daunting. There had been great shows of confidence from all his friends, but as his current location testified, Jesse was pretty sure they were as uncertain how this was going to turn out as he was.

"Ready, Jesse," Adam asked with a reassuring smile.

He nodded curtly and tried not to let his anxiety get the better of him.

"What do you want me to do?" he almost said 'try', but he refused to admit the possibility of failure.

"Let's start with something simple," Adam said efficiently. "Mass out for me. Don't try and hold it long, just mass out and then release."

Jesse nodded again feeling a little better with Adam's logical approach. Making his body dense had been easy for Jesse for a long while and he was good at it. He'd done this hundreds of times before, it would be a piece of cake.

Repeating this mantra to himself, he took a deep breath and prepared to use his abilities. The familiar feeling came to him easily and he let his molecular structure become impervious, covering his body with orange rivulets. There was no sudden pain, no barrier to his mutant power and it filled him with an instant joy. This was easy, nothing had changed and he felt he could go on, but then his concentration shattered when he saw the floor. Jesse let go of his powers instantly as he realised that the area where he was standing was also covered with the signs of his ability.

"Interesting," Adam said calmly as Jesse stared at the now perfectly normal floor.

"I did not try to do that," he said pointedly, more than a little flustered.

He had been able to transfer his phasing power to other objects for some time now, but it had always been harder and a different sensation to phasing himself. He had never tried massing out anything other than himself and his power had never "leaked" for want of a better term. The fact that he had massed out part of the floor and not even noticed was a distinct surprise.

"Did you feel any strain from encompassing the floor in your efforts?" Adam asked evenly.

Jesse shook his head, he was too shocked to come up with anything else.

"Then it appears you have had a distinct power boost," the scientist observed with a slight smile. "I suggest we work on this for a while and find your limits. It might be an idea to stay away from your ability to phase out until we have found at what point your powers no longer affect your environment. It wouldn't do for you to fall through the floor."

Adam said the whole last sentence with a dead straight face and it took Jesse's somewhat shell-shocked mind a moment to catch up. When he finally met Adam's eyes the man grinned and Jesse couldn't help but let out a laugh; it was kind of funny.

====

Jesse was bone tired when he wandered into the rec area and flopped down on one of the chairs. He had showered and changed after the all day session with Adam and had intended to fall into bed, but his mind was too full of thoughts to let him sleep. For the first time in weeks he was finally happy and it gave him more mental energy than he cared to think about, even if his body was begging to rest.

"You look wiped," Brennan commented and closed his book.

"I feel wiped," Jesse admitted with a tired smile, "but my head is buzzing. I think you could power a small town from my brain."

"Next you'll be putting me out of a job," Brennan replied lightly.

Jesse laughed and put his head back.

"Nah," he said cheerfully, "one lightening rod is enough for any team."

Brennan grinned and put his book down on the table.

"I was just thinking about some light refreshment," his friend said conversationally, "do you want anything."

"Coffee would be great," Jesse replied and gave a grateful smile, "at least then my body might have a chance of keeping up with my head."

The taller man stood up with a laugh.

"One coffee coming right up," he said dramatically.

As Brennan moved to fulfil his promise, Shalimar came striding into the room.

"Hey, Jess," she greeted lightly, "I thought you'd be in bed, you look like you've gone three rounds with a bear."

"I tried," he replied and gave her a smile too, knowing that his friends were just worried about him, "but I couldn't sleep, so I figured an evening with you reprobates was better than an evening spent staring at the ceiling."

"Fair enough," Shalimar said with a grin and languidly draped herself in the space Brennan had left.

"Hey, that's my chair," Brennan bantered as he turned back with the coffees.

Shalimar batted her eyelids at him and smiled.

"If you ask nicely I'll let you share it," she said coyly and Jesse had to laugh.

At one time the relationship between the feral and the elemental would have irked him somewhat, but Jesse had quite a new perspective on life these days and he was happy for them.

"Just remember you're not alone," he said in mock seriousness.

"Would we ever?" Shalimar said with complete innocence in her voice.

"Yes," Emma said lightly as she came down from the upper level.

Both Brennan and Shalimar did the best impression of indignant that Jesse had seen in a long while.

"More coffees?" Brennan asked as Emma also took a seat.

"Tea if there's any left, please," the telepath said sweetly.

"Just water for me," Shalimar requested with a fond glance at her significant other.

Jesse sat back and watched the interplay; it was nice to be in the middle of things again. The others had been there for him all through his incapacitation, but somehow now that he had his powers back in working order everything seemed right again. Shalimar was still keeping an eye on him, he could tell, but he felt like a real member of the team again and it was a good feeling.

The chatter was diverting and it was nice just to sit down with his friends and relax again, but as the evening wore on Jesse found that he was becoming a little uncomfortable. The temperature in the room appeared to be going up as if the air conditioning was failing.

"Anyone else think it's getting hot in here?" Jesse finally asked and gained everyone's attention.

"Temperature's fine by me," Brennan replied with a curious glance in his direction.

"Me too," Shalimar responded and climbed to her feet. "You look flushed, are you feeling okay, Jesse?"

She walked over and put her hand on his forehead in a very motherly gesture. It took her less than a second to react.

"Jesse, you're burning up," Shalimar said more than a little anxiously. "If Adam worked you too hard I'll ... I'll ..."

Shalimar was obviously trying to control the fiery temper that always threatened at times like this. Jesse would have tried to placate her, but he didn't have time. Emma was on her feet quickly and Jesse found himself flanked by the two beautiful women. Emma also felt Jesse's head and then spoke quickly into her ring.

"Adam, can you come to the rec area please, Jesse is unwell."

"Coming," came the almost instant, but very calm response.

As far as Jesse was concerned the temperature was still going up and now that everyone was focused on it the increase seemed to have escalated.

"Could I have some water, please," he asked in an attempt to find something to cool down.

Brennan provided a glass quickly and then proceeded to hover behind the two women. Jesse was not sure what was worse; the temperature or the worried looks on his friends' faces. He decided it was the temperature when he tried to bring the water to his lips and the liquid in the glass began to bubble. He simply stared at it stupidly for a couple of seconds and then the glass shattered causing every one to step away from him.

"Oh hell," was the best he could come up with to say.

The heat in his body was becoming very uncomfortable and the palms of his hands felt as if they were burning; it was a very unpleasant feeling. There appeared to be nothing Jesse could do to relieve the sensation and he felt like he was burning from the inside. Surprisingly it was Brennan that came to his rescue.

"Push it out, Jesse," the older man said very firmly and motioned for the women to move out of the way.

Jesse gave his friend a questioning look.

"The heat," Brennan said urgently, "take hold of it and push it out through your hands."

It was an odd thing to say, but it made a strange kind of sense to Jesse that he didn't question.

"Where?" was the only thing that was bothering him.

"Anywhere," Brennan replied earnestly. "Now!"

The word was so sharp and commanding that Jesse just did what he was told. He pointed his hands away from his friends and pushed the burning out of his body. Red light erupted from his fingers and palms and the paint bubbled off part of the wall.

"What happened?" Adam came hurrying into the room just as the whole incident finished.

Jesse stared stupidly at his hands; he had no idea what had just occurred.

"Elemental overload," Brennan supplied the answer just as he had supplied the solution.

Jesse looked at his friend as did everyone else in the room.

"It happened to me a couple of times as a kid, before I got a hold of my powers," Brennan said honestly.

Jesse's mind was throwing all sorts of 'buts' at that statement and he looked to Adam for help. The scientist looked thoughtful, but not surprised.

"But I'm a molecular, not an elemental," Jesse protested as everyone else seemed to accept the situation.

"That's not true anymore, Jesse," Adam said in a very patient tone. "You were a molecular; now you're a molecular that is part elemental, feral and psionic. I thought that by stabilising your genetic profile the other mutations had been reduced to insignificance; I was obviously incorrect."

Jesse stood up his mind whirling with all the possibilities.

"I don't want any more powers," he said a little desperately, "I can barely cope with the ones I have already."

He was in no way happy with the situation. This was insane; he'd almost fried himself or his friends and it could have been disastrous.

"Jesse," Adam said supportively and placed a hand on his shoulder, "we can work through this. I'll run some more test and we'll make sure you're prepared for anything that may be coming."

Somehow the words just made Jesse angry. This wasn't what he wanted; he couldn't deal with this it was too much.

"I don't want to be prepared," he said through gritted teeth, "I want it gone. I want to be me, not some super-freak who might explode at any minute."

"Jesse," Adam tried to placate him, but Jesse was not in any mood to calm down.

"Figure it out, Adam," he said pointedly. "I don't want to live like this."

Then he pushed past the older man and stalked towards his room.

====

Shalimar watched her friend leave and tried to bury the need to lash out at someone for Jesse's pain. It was not like it was any of their faults and snapping someone's head off would not help.

"I'll go and talk to him," Emma volunteered as Jesse stalked out of sight.

Adam nodded and as far as Shalimar was concerned their mentor appeared almost more tired than Jesse had. This was taking its toll on Adam as much as anyone and the team tended to forget that sometimes. Shalimar's protective streak was very strong and she was not sure who to be more protective of; Adam or Jesse.

"Can you help him?" she asked eventually as Emma followed Jesse out of the area. "Can you take away the changes?"

When Adam met her eyes he looked sad and resigned; it was all the answer Shalimar really needed, but he spoke anyway.

"No," the scientist replied regretfully. "Jesse's genetic structure was dangerously unstable when we brought him back here. I eliminated as much of the alterations as I could and stabilised the rest. If I try and alter his mutation anymore it will most likely kill him."

"Did you really think the other mutations wouldn't show?" Brennan asked after a moment's silence.

Adam looked pensive and Shalimar knew what his answer was going to be.

"I had hoped," the man replied. "The molecular mutation is predominant in Jesse's genetic code and I thought that he'd have at least a few months if not years before any of the other abilities would manifest themselves. It's like the rest of your powers; they will grow and change over time."

"Then we'll just have to help him live with them," Shalimar said resolutely; on this point she was very sure.

The three fell into a momentary silence and Shalimar found herself looking in the direction where the other two had disappeared. Her instincts told her to follow and offer her strength and her support to her teammate, but logic told her that Emma would have a better chance of calming Jesse down without interference.

"So what should we expect?" Brennan broke her train of thought by asking a sensible question; Shalimar was far too wrapped up in her need to help to formulate questions. "What did the nameless bastard who did this add into the mix?"

"Well you've already witnessed the thermal elemental," Adam said slowly, "then there's a mixture of feline and reptilian feral and finally telekinetic psionic. From the way the elements were combined I think the idea was to keep adding aspects of other mutations, but somehow Jesse escaped before they could change his DNA further."

"Man, Jesse is in for a rough ride," Brennan said regretfully and Shalimar had to agree with him.

It was hard enough dealing with one mutation; mixing them was just asking for trouble.

"So any clues as to what's next?" Shalimar asked hoping that Adam would give them some better news.

Their mentor shrugged.

"There's no way to tell," Adam supplied evenly. "It is possible that using his powers today stimulated the emergence of the thermal ability. It may have a similar effect on the other mutations or they may remain dormant. With a cloned body the mutations have had no chance to go through a normal life cycle; every part of Jesse has been forced together. Predicting how each mutation will develop is impossible with them all stimulating each other. I can keep them in check so they don't kill him, but I can do no more than that."

Shalimar found herself looking at the door again and she discovered an anger deep inside her for the person who had done this to her friend. If she ever found out who it was they would remember Shalimar Fox.

====

It wasn't exactly difficult to follow Jesse, since pure rage was coming off him in waves, and Emma trailed him to his room. When she paused by the open door, he was standing in the centre of the room glaring about as if he was not sure what to take his anger out on.

"You know you're asking the impossible don't you?" Emma said eventually.

Jesse turned rapidly on the spot and it was quite obvious that he had been lost in his own thoughts and had had no idea she was there.

"Someone did this to me," he said hotly. "Adam's a genius, so he can figure out how to undo it."

"That's not fair," the telepath pointed out calmly. "Adam already pulled off a miracle to save you."

Jesse just glared at her; he appeared to have no reply to that.

"Jesse," Emma said sympathetically, "I know you're angry and afraid, but this is not the end of the world. You learned to use your powers once, you can do so again."

A self-depreciating laugh was the first reply to her comment and what worried Emma was that she could feel the beginnings of self-loathing coming from the over emotional mutant.

"Stop it," she said pointedly and gained Jesse's full attention. "Don't you dare decide to hate yourself."

The emotions coming from her companion dimmed slightly and Emma knew she was beginning to get through.

"I don't know what I am any more," Jesse admitted eventually. "What if I turn out like Ashlocke?"

"Ashlocke was a psychopath, you're you," Emma pointed out firmly. "Your powers don't define you Jesse; they're part of you, but they are not all that you are."

"But am I?" he replied a little desperately and Emma knew they were getting to the heart of the problem now. "I'm dead, Emma. You buried me. What does that make me now?"

The telepath moved into the room and stood directly in front of her friend.

"Your original body is dead," she told him evenly, "but you did not die. I don't know how they did it, but someone transferred you, and I mean all of you, from one body to another. I can feel you, Jesse, you're not a copy, you are still you."

The look of relief that flew through his eyes was second only to the feeling that came with it. It occurred to Emma that this had been bothering Jesse ever since he had woken up, but that the incident with his new powers had tipped him over the edge. It was difficult to imagine what it must be like to wake up and find that you were a clone, but Emma was constructing a fair idea from the emotions racing through her companion. She was actually quite surprised he hadn't snapped before.

"I'm still a liability to the team," Jesse said eventually and Emma realised she hadn't quite won yet. "I can barely control my molecular powers and I could have fried someone tonight."

"So you need a little practice," the telepath said making light of the comment, "big deal. I've seen you phase a whole plane, remember, it'll be a synch."

When she grinned at him, Jesse did have the grace to half smile back.

"I could kill someone with my lack of practice," he commented shortly, falling back into his black mood quickly. "I don't even know what to expect anymore."

"Well we know what you're made of," Emma replied, refusing to sink into Jesse's mood, "and so we have a fair idea. We'll all help you when and if any other powers emerge. You can't change what you are, Jesse, but you can deal with it."

"Is that your way of saying 'you're stuck with it so get over yourself'?" Jesse asked after a moment.

Emma gave him a you're-putting-yourself-down-again look and after a small staring contest the frown finally disappeared from his face.

"Is it possible to win an argument with an esper?" Jesse asked plaintively.

"Yes," Emma said with a smile, "just not with me."

"I reserve the right to be annoyed," Jesse concluded firmly.

End of Chapter 2

Chapter 3 Acceptance

Jesse walked into Adam's office and came to a halt in front of the older man with his hands on his hips; he looked upset. Adam had not been expecting him yet this morning.

"Jesse," Adam greeted with a smile even though his companion did not look in a mood to reciprocate, "is there a problem."

Rather than replying, the young man just frowned and appeared to be considering something.

"I've lost my voice," he finally said in no more than a whisper and he winced at the same time.

It sounded like a very bad attack of laryngitis and Jesse did not look happy about it. Adam climbed to his feet and walked over to his young friend.

"It's probably just that your immune system is low and you've picked up an infection," he said with a reassuring smile. "Let's go to the lab and I'll take a look."

Jesse seemed to want to express his opinion on the situation, but he didn't argue and Adam assumed speaking was too painful to bother. They walked out of the office together.

"Come and sit down," Adam said as they entered the lab and indicated the couch on which Jesse seemed to be spending an inordinate amount of time lately, "this shouldn't take long."

Jesse looked very non-plussed about the idea, but did as he was asked. Adam went for the low-tech solution and picked up a small torch and a wooden spatula.

"Okay," he said lightly, "open wide."

With a resigned sigh, Jesse obeyed the command and Adam shone the light on the back of the young man's throat. The area around Jesse's tonsils appeared decidedly inflamed and it did not take long for Adam to find the cause. He stood back from Jesse trying to maintain a neutral expression and wondering how he was going to break the news to his companion. Jesse looked at Adam hard when the older man didn't say anything and the question was obvious in his eyes.

"Your throat's been irritated by a foreign substance," he started slowly, dancing around the issue, "I'll give you something to reduce the inflammation."

Adam turned away to place the instruments down, but Jesse caught his arm.

"What substance?" Jesse asked in what sounded like a very painful manner.

"Venom," Adam said eventually.

Jesse's eyes opened wide in shock and then narrowed again in anger; he looked very upset. He was not taking the changes to his body well and Adam had a suspicion that he was dealing with raging feral emotions as well as everything else. He gave his companion his best sympathetic look, but it did nothing to help.

"I'll give you something to reduce the irritation," he said before Jesse could storm out. "Your body should adjust in a day or so. The inflammation is minor and the venom sacks look perfectly healthy; the leakage is most probably due to their development."

The tension in Jesse's body was almost painful to look at; he sat there rigidly as Adam walked to one of the supply cabinets. When he turned back with an anaesthetic spray in his hand, his companion had not moved and was glaring at the world in general as if he was about to explode. Jesse appeared very similar to Shalimar when she was in an extremely bad mood.

Adam walked back slowly and knew that what he had in mind was probably going to be received as well as a bullet in the head, but he had to make it anyway.

"You'll need to spray this into your throat once every four hours or so until the irritation goes away," he said evenly and gave the small bottle to his companion.

Jesse went to stand up, but Adam calmly put himself in the way.

"There's just one more thing," he said slowly as Jesse frowned at him, "I need a sample of the venom."

Anger and indignation filled Jesse's expression and he grunted an incomprehensible reply and tried to push past Adam. If Jesse had wanted to, there would have been nothing that Adam could do to stop him, but as it was he managed to prevent Jesse leaving. Jesse was angry, but at least he wasn't irrational.

"Jesse," Adam said firmly, "I need to know how dangerous the venom is. Do you really want to hurt someone by accident because you don't know what you're capable of?"

It was a little below the belt given Jesse's current emotional state, but it was the truth and Adam's words brought the younger man up short. The fury in his face turned to hurt and confusion and Adam wished there was something he could do to take away all the pain. Jesse had had the most trouble adjusting to his new powers after his growth spurt and now he had more to bear than most people would ever dream of.

"It will only take a second," Adam promised faithfully. "Just sit back down, I'll take a swab and it will be over."

Jesse just stood there for a moment with one foot on the floor, half on and half off of the couch and then he slowly nodded. Adam turned away to retrieve the necessary supplies as the young man sat back down. The whole situation was very hard on Jesse, but at least when Adam looked into his face there was one thing he didn't see; despair.

====

The spray seemed to be working and Jesse felt the pain subside as he walked towards where he could hear the other's having breakfast. He had gone straight from his room to see Adam and he had not yet bumped into the other three today. Jesse was still angry at the whole situation, but with the irritation in his throat lessening he was beginning to calm down. Emma had been right; there

was nothing he could do to change things so he really had no choice, but to just get on with life. Jesse wasn't happy about it, but he had a strong practical streak.

It was only as he reached the entrance to the other room that he came to a halt. It suddenly struck him that if he spoke to the others he was going to have some explaining to do and he felt irrationally embarrassed about the whole situation. He was considering going back to his room when Emma turned around and smiled.

"Morning, Jesse," she greeted brightly, "come join us. Shal was just explaining why a female feral will always be more dangerous than a male."

"It's true," Shalimar said lightly, "in nature the female of the species is always more deadly than the male even when she's smaller."

Jesse was pretty sure that wasn't true, but he was in no mood to contradict her.

"Well with all those hormones," Brennan chimed in, "I'm not going to argue with you."

There was going to be some repercussion for that statement, Jesse could tell and he really had no choice now, so he put on his best smile and sat down. Brennan and Shalimar spent a good five minutes verbally sparing over the point with Emma prodding the conversation every so often before anyone noticed that Jesse was not joining in.

"So what's Adam have lined up for you today, Jess?" Brennan finally asked in a very unsubtle attempt to bring him into the conversation. "You will warn us if you're going to phase the whole mountain, right?"

Even in his current mood Jesse had to smile at that, but he knew a shrug would not satisfy the other three.

"Don't know," he went for the shortest answer possible and although his throat was nicely numb his voice was very croaky.

"Trying to impress the ladies with a husky new voice?" Brennan chose to make light of the problem.

Jesse gave him a thank-you-so-much-for-that-comment smile.

"Sore throat," he said shortly.

"Tell me that on top of everything you don't have flu," Shalimar said taking the whole thing a little more seriously.

When the feral was in protective mode she took many things seriously and although Jesse appreciated the support he hoped she would snap out of it soon.

"No flu," Jesse promised and out of the corner of his eye he could see Emma looking at him.

He just knew that the telepath could tell he was hiding something. Both Shalimar and Brennan were also waiting for more and Jesse knew he was not going to get away with this one. Taking a deep breath he took the opportunity for what it was.

"Venom," he said eventually.

The other three just sat there for a moment as if they weren't sure how to take the news.

"You're venomous now," Brennan said eventually, "and you're allergic to it?"

The way it came out of Brennan's mouth struck Jesse as kind of funny; when put like that it sounded faintly ridiculous and much to his surprise he found himself half-smiling.

"Get used to it in a few days," he said expressing his point in as few words as he would manage.

A mischievous glint appeared in Brennan's eyes and Jesse knew he was about to be the, butt of a joke.

"And until then you can barely talk?" the other man said innocently.

Jesse didn't believe it for a second and just looked at his friend.

"This could be fun," the elemental concluded with a wicked grin.

"How'd you fancy falling through that chair," Jesse threatened playfully, although his voice almost gave out completely before he finished the sentence.

"How'd you like electrified cornflakes?" Brennan shot back.

Jesse saw the two women give each other a look.

"Boys!" was Shalimar's concise opinion on the matter.

====

It was just after lunch when Jesse walked back into the lab. He had been practicing with his molecular powers all morning and the success he had achieved had brightened his outlook considerably. His powers have evolved somewhat, but they had not changed that much and it had been fun testing them out. However, the exercises had also given him time to think and his musings had brought him back to the lab.

Jesse knew that Adam had a complete breakdown of all the additions to his DNA and they had discussed it briefly, but never in detail. Since two quirks of his new genetic makeup had already made themselves known, Jesse guessed that others would most likely be on their way. This time he was not just going to let them happen; he was going to be proactive about this.

"Ah, Jesse," Adam greeted cheerfully, "I was just going to call you. I have finished the analysis of your venom."

Talking was not the most pleasant experience just now so Jesse chose not to answer and simply walked over to where his mentor was standing.

"You'll be pleased to know you are unlikely to accidentally poison anyone," the older man told him. "Your venom appears to be akin to those of some spitting

snakes, designed to incapacitate an attacker by blinding them rather than for predatory purposes. It's an irritant and will burn on contact with skin, but unless you spray it in someone's eyes you shouldn't do any lasting damage."

Well at least that was good news and settled one of Jesse's worries.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" the older man asked calmly.

"Breakdown of mutations," Jesse said shortly trying to make his point without saying a great deal; the spray was wearing off, but he wasn't due for another dose for at least half an hour, "please," he added as an afterthought.

Adam looked surprised.

"You want my file on you?" the scientist asked openly.

Jesse nodded; it was so much easier than talking.

"Well of course you're welcome to see it," Adam told him willingly, "but may I ask why?"

"Pro-active," was his response and Adam actually looked pleased, "no more surprises."

A smile graced the other man's face and Jesse was now sure he was doing the right thing.

"I'm very happy to hear you say that," Adam said honestly, "I was beginning to think maybe you were going to try and ignore all the possibilities."

Jesse shrugged, after all that is exactly what he had been trying to do.

"Some of your mutations are dormant," Adam continued explaining as he stood up and led Jesse over to another terminal, "but I no longer believe they will stay that way for long. You can't force them, but there are some exercises you might like to try to stimulate their evolution. The sooner they appear the sooner we can make sure they are completely stable."

Jesse had not been quite sure what to expect, after all he had only ever dealt with powers that had made themselves known before, but Adam sounded confident, so Jesse tried to be as well. He had the feeling that he was in for a busy time over the next few days.

====

Shalimar walked into the rec. area and just stopped at the peculiar sight in front of her. Jesse was sitting at the table with his hands flat on the surface and his chin directly on top of them staring at a plastic cup just in front of his nose. He did not appear to be doing anything else.

"Is this a private party or can anyone join in?" she asked lightly as she once again started to move.

"Pull up a chair," Jesse offered and his voice sounded a little more normal than it had that morning, "but I warn you it's as boring as hell."

Watching her friend curiously, Shalimar walked further into the room and came round so she could see his face.

"What are you doing?" she asked, as she saw the look of concentration on his face.

"Telekinesis," he said shortly, the frown between his eyes growing.

Shalimar sat down.

"How're you doing?" she asked conversationally.

"Badly," was the terse response.

It appeared that Jesse was not in the mood to communicate, so Shalimar sat and watched him in silence for a few moments. He had been right; it was boring. When Jesse continued to stare at the cup and ignore her, Shalimar decided that she might as well leave him to it. Standing up, she wandered over to the coffee machine and poured herself a cup. Emma was helping Adam, Brennan had disappeared off somewhere and so that left just Jesse, but he appeared to be busy, which added up to not a lot of fun as far as Shalimar was concerned. She considered her options for a moment and then glanced down at the coffee; maybe she could bribe Jesse with caffeine, she was not in the mood to be alone.

Putting her mug down, she wandered back the way she had come and stood behind her companion for a moment. He really did appear to be concentrating hard. Reaching out she tapped him on the shoulder and the cup in front of him went shooting off the table. Jesse sat up rapidly and turned to her with a startled look on his face.

"Looks like you're doing better now," Shalimar said with a grin.

"Yeah and all I need is you to scare the living crap out of me every time I want to move something," the younger mutant shot back as an answering smile broke onto his face.

"That can be arranged," she replied lightly. "Can I tempt you away with the offer of coffee?"

"Since you asked so nicely," Jesse replied and his voice was sounding very husky again, "but I don't promise a lot of conversation."

====

Even though Jesse could not stop himself, he knew there was only one way to describe what he was doing; he was prowling. So far he had walked from one end of the complex to the other and back again five times and if he'd been able to, he would have been climbing the walls. He felt caged.

The others were out; Emma and Brennan were checking out a new mutant who was causing trouble down on the waterfront by flooding out several boats. Something to do with extortion; pay up or your boat sinks as the sea gains a mind of its own. Shalimar was checking out a possible witness to Jesse's kidnapping, but no one was holding out much hope, and Adam was meeting one of his government contacts. That left Jesse all by himself going stir crazy in the empty base waiting for the others to come back.

Everything had been going fine to begin with. Jesse had been practicing with his powers using the exercises Brennan had shown him to give his elemental side a work out. His thermal abilities were not huge; he could set small fires and heat up conductors, but neither were they non-existent, so he was trying to understand them as instructed.

Jesse was beginning to realise that each power had a very different feel to it and although the ability to expel heat from his hands was nowhere near as well developed as his molecular abilities, it was quite engaging. He did not have to hold his breath to use it, which was a nice change and it came much easier to him than the telekinesis. Moving things with his mind had not been overly successful, although, over the last two days, he had managed to mostly remove the need for someone to scare him half to death for his psionic power to work.

It had been while he was attempting to boil a small cup of water in a controlled manner that the problems had started. Jesse had been calmly sitting on the floor with his hand positioned over the heatproof bowl when he had smelled something. At first it had not really bothered him and he had continued with the exercise, but soon the smell had distracted him. It was a strange smell that Jesse could not quite identify and it had slowly drawn his concentration away from his task.

Eventually he had stood up and quite literally followed his nose as he tried to identify the source of the smell. He had ended up outside Brennan's room quite bewildered by the whole experience. Since he could not identify the smell and he was not going to invade his friend's personal space without a very good reason, he had been left somewhat frustrated. That was when he'd started prowling.

He was confused and annoyed and pacing up and down was really not helping. His sense of smell was now picking up random things and he had an overriding desire to get out of the confines of the mountain and into any open space. It was quite difficult to control the urge to just leave. It was on his sixth lap of the base that he smelt something familiar and found himself unconsciously headed for the entrance. He was so intent of following his nose that he almost bowled Shalimar over.

"Hey, Jesse," she greeted cheerfully.

For some reason her good mood annoyed Jesse and he glared at her, his sense of smell sharpening even more for a few seconds and the world took on a vaguely surreal quality. Shalimar's eyes widened in surprise and then understanding flashed into her features.

"Feeling a little wild, Jesse?" she asked in a calm reasonable tone.

"Need to get out," was the most articulate phrase he could manage.

"Know the feeling well," Shalimar said lightly, placing herself between Jesse and the exit, "and I'll see what I can come up with, but you have to do something for me first."

Blocking him from his means of leaving annoyed Jesse somewhat, but this was Shalimar; she was one of the pack and hence on his side. The conflicting desires to flee and remain within the group left him in a state of inaction.

"What?" he asked tersely.

"Take a deep breath," she said slowly her body language relaxed and neutral, "and let it out slowly. Try and remember why you want to get out; if you can tell me I can help better."

It seemed stupid and irrelevant, but she was offering to help so Jesse did as he was asked. The deep breath assailed his sense of smell with all sorts of new scents, but he tried to ignore them and concentrate on why he wanted to leave. It took him a good thirty seconds to figure out that he didn't know why he wanted to leave at which point his anger just sort of evaporated. Jesse found himself looking at Shalimar a little lost for words.

"Feeling better?" she asked with a half smile.

"I..." he said slowly, but was unable to come up with anything sensible to say. "What just happened?" he asked eventually.

"Feral," Shalimar said lightly, "you gave me the old yellow eye and everything."

"Oh," was all Jesse chose to say.

The female feral put her arm round his shoulders with a grin.

"I think you and me need to have a talk about how brooding and ferals do not go together," she said cheerfully, "and how to take out feelings of frustration on inanimate objects."

Jesse let himself be led as he tried to sort out the details of what had happened to him. Shalimar seemed to be totally unconcerned, which was a blessing, and once again Jesse was very glad of his friends.

"So can you tell me what set all this off?" she asked conversationally and Jesse dragged his mind to the present.

"Smell," Jesse finally decided, "I smelled something and it distracted me."

"Any particular thing?" Shalimar asked as if she was just curious.

Jesse shrugged.

"I couldn't identify it," he admitted thinking back, "but I think it was coming from Brennan's room."

"Probably dirty socks," Shalimar said with a grin.

That made Jesse laugh; his friend's mood was infectious.

"So your sense of smell has kicked in," she continued lightly, "we'll have to work on that; you could find it very useful."

On that point Jesse was not so sure, but he nodded anyway. The least he had to do was learn how to cope with suddenly being assailed by overpowering smells.

"So where do we start?" he asked evenly.

"Feline feral emotions 101," Shalimar said with a smile, "we don't want you suddenly phasing off just because you have a desire to see open sky."

End of Chapter 3

Chapter 4 The Truth

Adam was late returning and Shalimar was just about ready to go and look for him by the time he came walking back into the base. He looked somewhat excited, which caused her to hold back the sarcastic remark she had been working on about not calling in. She and all the others were in the rec area and Adam barely took a moment to throw his coat over a chair before he began speaking.

"At last I think we have something," he announced to them all.

"Your contact came through?" Shalimar asked quickly.

The older man nodded.

"I think Jesse may have been snatched by a government black ops operation," Adam explained quickly. "My contact has heard rumours of something going down to do with new mutants. All he could find out were murmurs about an accident near where we picked Jesse up, but it's a start."

"But I thought Genomex were the government black ops operation to do with new mutants," Emma voiced the thought that occurred to Shalimar as well, "and they're gone."

"Unfortunately, all their expertise was not destroyed," Adam replied calmly, "and there are factions within the military who are not so easily removed."

"But we know where they are?" Brennan put in quickly and he sounded as ready to leap into action as Shalimar felt.

At that Adam looked less enthusiastic.

"Chances are we know where they were," the leader of Mutant X replied. "From the vague reports my contact found the base was all, but destroyed."

"But there might be some clues left behind," Shalimar said firmly; she was not about to let anyone diminish this step forward.

This was the first ray of light in the whole investigation and it might lead to more. Finding out who had taken Jesse was important to all of them.

"What are we waiting for?" Jesse asked and the feral had to agree.

Adam nodded; he was obviously also of the opinion that it was time for action.

"Nothing," Adam replied. "Shalimar, Emma and Brennan get to the Helix, Jesse I want you on the computers at this end."

Shalimar's gaze went straight to Jesse and she saw the dismay and anger cross his face. Jesse had been cooped up for weeks and he was obviously not happy about Adam's decision. Shalimar was quite proud of her younger friend when he took a deep breath and brought his feelings under control.

"Adam, I don't want to be left behind," Jesse said in a calm and controlled manner.

"We could meet opposition, Jesse," Adam returned evenly, "you're not ready for that."

Shalimar could see the tension in her friend as he slowly stood up; he was working very hard to control his temper, quite a feat for an emerging feral.

"If this is where I was being held it might jog my memory," the young man said tightly. "Adam I was probably in the accident your friend heard about."

The leader of Mutant X appeared to consider this for a moment and then shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Jesse," Adam said firmly after a moment, "it's too much of a risk to you and the rest of the team."

Then he turned and walked away. Shalimar watched as Jesse sort of deflated and she made a decision. Patting her friend's arm she gave him a small smile of support and then she set off after their disappearing leader.

"Adam," she called after him, "can I talk to you?"

Adam turned slightly as she caught up with him, but continued walking.

"Yes, Shalimar?" he asked calmly.

"I think you're wrong," she said bluntly, never one to mince her words.

That comment brought Adam to a halt; he had obviously not expected opposition from the rest of the team. The scientist glanced back at where Jesse and the other two were watching them just out of earshot.

"Jesse does not have control of his powers yet," Adam said simply. "If we are forced into a combat situation he could get hurt."

"So could we all," Shalimar replied evenly. "He might not be quite ready, Adam, but he needs this. When I came back today I found him ready to tear the place apart. His feral is coming out and if you don't give him something to focus on he's going to end up phasing out of this mountain with or without your say so."

Adam took the news calmly and thoughtfully, and then he looked at Jesse again. Shalimar could see he was considering her opinion which was one thing she had always admired about Adam; he was not afraid to reassess his position.

"That does change things," he agreed slowly.

Eventually he nodded.

"Okay," Adam said evenly, "Jesse can come, but make sure he knows he is staying on the Helix until the rest of us have secured the area. I need to check something in the lab and then I'll join you."

Shalimar smiled brightly.

"Thanks, Adam," she said and then turned back to the others.

====

Jesse was sitting in the Helix watching the scanners; so far there was nothing on them except the other four members of Mutant X. The pictures the others were sending back from their communicators had not jogged any memories, but then from the outside the building looked like any other empty warehouse. They were only a few miles from where Adam said they had picked Jesse up and he was quite surprised he hadn't been found by his captors first.

"This place is deserted," was Shalimar's succinct opinion on the building.

The four were wandering about inside now in two groups and there had been no signs of activity at all. Jesse was itching to get out there with his friends and it was taking a lot of willpower to wait for the signal. Ever since his feral began to emerge Jesse was gaining even more respect for Shalimar; his instincts were blunted quite heavily and he was having trouble controlling them, he could not imagine what it was like for Shalimar all of the time.

"I don't feel anything," Emma added her view of the situation to the mix.

"The scans show nothing except you four," Jesse put his perception of the situation in as well and crossed his fingers.

There was silence for a few moments.

"Okay," Adam's voice came over the com, "the area is as secure as we can make it. Jesse join Emma and I on the right side of the building."

Jesse hadn't moved so fast in a long time. He almost didn't bother opening the door and phased straight through it, but thought better of it and used the regular exit from the plane. It took him five minutes to make it from the landing site to where his team-mates were waiting. He was grinning broadly when he finally arrived; he couldn't help it; it was wonderful to be out of Sanctuary.

It was only after they found the charred entrance to what appeared to be an underground complex that he began to feel a little edgy. At first it was just a slight feeling of unease, but, as he followed Emma and Adam down the concrete staircase, it grew slightly. There was no way he was going to chicken out after Shalimar had fought for him to be here, so he bit his lip and continued after his companions.

The corridor they descended into was dim, but there appeared to still be emergency lighting working, so they could just about see. Everywhere there was destruction. Every wall was scorched and the smell of smoke hung in the air.

"Be careful," Adam warned quietly, "parts of the structure may be unsafe from the fire."

Both Jesse and Emma nodded and the telepath gave her mutant companion a questioning look; it appeared that she had noticed his unease. Jesse just shrugged slightly and then turned back to his job. The trio continued down the corridor past the debris of burnt out wires and pipes hanging from the ceiling; only the shielded emergency light system seemed to have survived the disaster that had over taken the complex.

The burnt walls did not stir anything in Jesse's memory, but they did increase his anxiety. As Adam and Emma picked their way towards one of two doors quite

close to them, he just stood for a moment and looked around. His eyes fixed on a charred sign with red writing almost totally burnt away and then suddenly it wasn't burnt any more. The wall was white and the sign was shiny and new with bright red writing. It was a blurred and dreamy image as if he was seeing it through a haze and from a different angle. With the image came some small knowledge.

When the present reasserted itself, Jesse turned and found that Emma was looking at him intently.

"It's a test facility," Jesse said shortly, covering the anxiety the memory caused with professional efficiency, "they brought me here to check out some of my mutations."

Emma looked a little worried about him for a moment, but she did not voice it to Adam. Jesse appreciated the trust she showed in him.

"Then let's see what we can find," Adam decided quickly and walked through the door he had reached.

Emma turned and followed him, at which point Jesse took a deep breath and made his way after them. The worry that was plaguing him was beginning to crystallise into a knot of fear in his stomach, but he was not going to let it stop him.

"There's nothing up here," Brennan's voice came over the com just as Jesse reached the room, "Shalimar and I have swept the whole area."

"Understood," Adam replied quickly, "one of you stay up there to guard our back, the other come down here. I think we've found their test lab."

Jesse barely took any notice of the information; he was frozen in the doorway. Everything in the room was black, but what drew Jesse's eyes was the chair come couch in the centre of the room that looked so much like the one back at Sanctuary. What made this one different were the large metal restraints at the four points where any occupant's limbs would have been. Jesse had gone cold all over and it took great effort to convince his legs that he should walk into the room. His heart was thumping in his chest and the instinct to turn and run was almost overwhelming.

"Jesse, are you okay?" Emma finally asked the question she had failed to voice earlier.

"No," he replied shortly, even as he walked towards the chair, "but I didn't think I was going to be."

Adam looked at him speculatively from where he was examining a burnt out computer terminal. Jesse hardened his expression and returned his mentor's gaze evenly. He was not leaving; not when he might find answers to all the questions that had been stacking up in his head since this had all happened. Adam nodded slightly as if he had decided something in his own mind and then went back to what he had been doing. Jesse did not look at Emma, he knew her worried eyes would still be watching him; instead he set about examining the chair.

It didn't take long to deduce that the restraints had been carefully designed; they were strong enough to hold a full feral, appeared to have some sort of energy

circuitry to prevent a molecular escaping and the seals were electromagnetic rather than mechanical to prevent a telekinetic manipulating them. Jesse was in no doubt these restraints had been designed specifically for the worst-case scenario of all his mutations. He walked round the chair slowly, trying to jog his memory, but it was when he disturbed a pile of ash next to the device that it hit him.

His feline sense of smell flicked in so quickly that Jesse had no time to defend himself against it and there was one scent that made it passed the smell of soot; burnt flesh. It was so overwhelming that it triggered his memory.

Suddenly Jesse was strapped down and in pain; he was hot, he was burning and no one would help him.

"Subject Delta is exhibiting signs of stress," a female voice said in a detached scientific tone. "His system appears to be adapting to the drug cocktail being used to suppress his gestalt abilities and we had to employ the normal restraints this morning. Contrary to my colleague's beliefs I have been forced to consider using the restraining collar which could inhibit the development of Delta's mutations. When we have finished this battery of test I recommend returning the subject to HQ for further engineering."

A face was given to the voice when a woman bent over him. She was in her forties, her black hair was tied up behind her head and there was no emotion in her face; she was observing him like an object. Her cold demeanour made him angry and he needed to escape.

"The subject appears to be experiencing some form of thermal discomfort," she continued while still looking down at him. "The elemental mutation may require adjusting."

The burning was getting worse and Jesse knew he had to do something about it. He felt like he was on fire and his whole body was about to melt. It hurt and Jesse desperately needed to release the pressure that was building inside him. No one would help and he didn't know what to do; the pain was almost unbearable. Every breath was like taking raw fire into his lungs and he knew it could not go on.

Through tear filled eyes he saw his captor stand back from him with a look of worry on her face. She was slowly moving away when Jesse couldn't take it anymore. The agony was too much and he reached inside to where instinct lived and, pulling against the restraints, he screamed and fire erupted from his body; it consumed everything and he couldn't stop it. He barely even heard his captor scream or the cries from the guards and the technicians.

Jesse came back to the present kneeling on the floor barely able to breathe. He was trying to drag air into his lungs in short, painful bursts as panic took away all control. It was so much worse than he could ever have imagined.

Before he could lose all sense of reality, Emma was in front of him kneeling in the ash. She looked him straight in the eyes and held his gaze.

"Jesse," she said evenly, "just breathe. Try and take slow even breaths. You're hyperventilating and if you keep going you'll pass out. There is nothing to be afraid of; you were just remembering."

But it wasn't just any memory; he had killed them all. How could he deal with that? Jesse couldn't breathe and he couldn't bring himself under control; he was lost in despair. Emma grabbed him by the shoulders and he just about saw the psionic blast before it hit him. The world went away in a haze of summer flowers and gentle sunshine.

====

"Emma," Adam placed a hand on her shoulder and Brennan caught Jesse as he slumped away from her, "what happened?"

It was not always easy to tell what was going on in a person's head from the impressions she gained from them, but from Jesse it had been all too clear. She had no details, but Emma knew exactly what had occurred.

"Jesse remembered what happened here," she said slowly, allowing Adam to help her to her feet.

She was still trying to sort through the ideas in her head, but she knew she had to go on.

"His thermal power did this," Emma continued slowly, "it overwhelmed him and he caused all this damage."

Adam appeared confused.

"Why did he react so badly?" the scientist asked.

"There were people here, Adam," the psionic replied evenly, "the ash is people."

Adam looked shocked; it did not appear to have occurred to him that the damage to the facility could have taken life.

"Oh my god," the older man said and looked over to where Brennan was holding an unconscious Jesse. "We should never have brought him here."

"We couldn't have stopped him," Emma said firmly and was surprised to find herself in the role of reassuring Adam. "At least he remembered while he has friends around; can you imagine the damage this would have done if we hadn't been here."

Emma was in no mood to play the blame game; the overwhelming feelings of guilt and anguish from Jesse had almost been too much for her and trying to assign culpability would help no one. Adam was not about to cut himself up because he had let Jesse come here; not if Emma DeLauro had any say in the matter; of that she was very sure.

"Brennan, get Jesse back to the Helix," Adam said eventually and Emma was glad to see him fall back into leader mode, "Emma and I will finish our search down here, but there does not appear to be much left."

The leader of Mutant X went back to his examination of the burnt out lab as his orders were obeyed, but Emma continued to watch him. It had taken her a long time to even begin to comprehend Adam and she still found him confusing at times. Emma knew Shalimar could be very protective of their team leader and it was at times like this the telepath knew why. Under the calm, scientific exterior

there dwelt a sensitive man who was always under pressure because of a responsibility he had taken on himself for something that was not entirely his fault.

Emma could tell the guilt was still there in Adam for what he perceived he had done to Jesse, but it appeared to be controlled. With a mental sigh she went back to work; all she could do was keep half an eye on him.

====

Adam sat back from his computer screen and rubbed his eyes. When the suspicion had first entered his mind he had hoped he was wrong, now he was sure and he really didn't know what to do about it. With the changes he had made to Jesse's mutation to save him, Adam's findings could be irrelevant and he did not want to put more stress on the young man, but the information could also be crucial in finding who had done this to him. As if on cue, Emma walked into the room.

"You should take a break," she said glancing at him critically, "you look tired."

Adam nodded at her; he felt tired, but it did not alter his dilemma.

"I was about to," he told her honestly, "I have just finished my latest analysis. Is Jesse still sleeping?"

Emma nodded.

"I doubt he'll wake up before this evening," the telepath replied. "Shalimar is sitting with him just in case. Did you find anything the rest of us should know?"

Her innocent expression did not fool Adam for a minute; Emma had obviously picked up on his emotions and was fishing. The young woman was very good at masking her motives these days, but not from those that knew her so well. However, the direct question was an obvious path forward and still not quite sure it was the right thing to do Adam took it.

"Whoever created the cloned body was not trying to create a stable super mutant," the older man said evenly, "they were trying to create a weapon."

Emma frowned slightly.

"I'm not sure I follow you," she replied evenly, "surely a super mutant is a weapon."

"Yes," Adam told her, "but I'm talking about a bomb; disposable, expendable and deadly. Jesse' genetic structure was never supposed to be stable and it was not supposed to manifest in separate powers; he was supposed to be a gestalt."

"A gestalt?" the telepath asked still not quite clear.

"A super mutant like Ashlocke has powers from all mutant categories," Adam offered as explanation, "which he or she may use, but each power is separate. Sometimes they may appear to be using two for the same purpose, but technically they are just using both at the same time. A gestalt's powers are linked together and feed off each other directly. I had not considered the possibility until we went to the underground facility. The evidence there spoke for

itself. Jesse's elemental abilities are nowhere near evolved enough to have caused the amount of damage we saw, but in gestalt you can multiply the destructive power a hundred times."

The expression on Emma's face was a combination of mild horror and disbelief.

"Are you sure?" she finally asked. "It seems like a lot of trouble for a single use weapon."

"If you can transfer a consciousness from one body to another once you can do it again," Adam did not bother to hide his outrage, "and imagine a weapon that can walk to his target, seemingly innocent and unarmed and then destroy everything around him. I don't think the plan was ever to just engineer Jesse once, I think his captors were going to do it again and again."

Emma had now moved on to disgust.

"That's inhuman," she said as if the very thought was unclean.

"And dangerous," Adam told her evenly. "Gestalt's are inherently unstable. Combining mutant powers so they work as one, feeding off each other, creates too much flux in the mutations themselves and eventually the genetic structure breaks down completely. Genomex carried out some trials on gestalt properties and even they deemed them impractical. You know how unstable Ashlocke was with his separate mutations; making a gestalt increases the power and the instability at the same time."

"Will his powers eventually kill Jesse?" Emma asked after a moment's pause.

Adam shook his head; of this he was very sure, he had no choice, the alternative was unthinkable.

"Not if I have anything to do with it," he said firmly. "The treatments I have given him should have separated the different aspects of the mutations; he has the various abilities, but they are no longer combined. I should have realised it when we first brought him in, but I thought the abnormalities I saw were to do with his genetic instability not that they had been engineered that way. Jesse "went off" for want of a better phrase, in that test facility. His genetic structure held together the first time, barely, but if it were ever to happen again there would most likely be nothing left."

=====

Adam watched his team calmly and his eyes kept returning to Jesse. The young mutant had woken up an hour or so earlier, but he had said barely a word to anyone since. Even Emma had failed to encourage him to talk and the look of desolation in the young man's eyes worried Adam greatly. Standing up slowly from where he had been sitting reading, the scientist came to a decision.

"Jesse," he said evenly, "please come with me."

Walking towards his office, he did not wait to see if Jesse was following; he was not about to debate this. When he reached the furthest side of the room he stopped and only then did he turn; Jesse was standing just inside the doorway.

"I want you to listen to me very carefully," he said slowly, "and I want you to believe everything I say."

He paused, but Jesse did not comment; he just continued looking at Adam with his empty, bleak eyes.

"You are not responsible for those people dying," he said firmly.

"It was my power," Jesse said flatly.

Adam walked back towards his young friend until they were only inches apart.

"You were designed as a weapon," he said pointedly, "a gestalt. Those scientists were playing with things they had no business messing with and they paid for it. You could not have stopped what occurred. It is not your fault your powers were unstable and it is not your fault they died. Do you understand me?"

Adam found that he was shouting and Jesse looked vaguely scared, but at least it was better than the blankness that had been in his face before.

"Jesse," Adam said regulating his tone, "you could not have saved them. Creating a gestalt magnifies a mutant's power by tens if not hundreds of times and there is no way to gain real control. That you survived is a miracle and it is the one I am thankful for. They didn't design you to have control; they designed you to use your powers once in an almighty explosion and you blew up in their faces. You cannot blame yourself."

Jesse blinked at him and there was just a hint of feeling behind his eyes.

"But they all died," he said in no more than a whisper.

"Yes," Adam said vehemently, "but not because of you. They died because they took control away from you. There was nothing you could have done."

As Adam watched, Jesse lent back on the wall and slowly slid down it, burying his head in his hands. Adam crouched down beside him and placed his fingers on his young friend's arm.

"You were the source, Jesse," he said much more gently, "not the cause. It was like the disease that took away your control only worse: they combined your powers and magnified them without considering the consequences."

When Jesse finally looked up there were tears in his eyes, but Adam knew he had made it through to his companion because there was feeling there to see. Adam had never been so glad to see pain in someone's expression.

"What if it happens again?" Jesse asked quietly.

"It won't," Adam said evenly, "you have control. I have undone as much of what they did to you as I know how and you are no longer a gestalt. Don't shut yourself off from us for something that wasn't your fault, Jesse."

It was obvious that the young man was trying desperately not to cry and Adam gave him a reassuring smile.

"It was not you, understand?" he said gently and breathed a huge sigh of relief when Jesse actually nodded.

====

It took a couple of days, but eventually Jesse bounced back. Shalimar spent the entire time keeping a very close eye on him and she was sure that he was almost back to his old self when he finally began complaining about the fact.

"Shalimar," Jesse said in a very put upon tone as he walked away from the exercise mat and she followed him, "I'm going to take a shower, I can manage by myself."

"You can help me if you like," Brennan said mischievously as he walked passed her from where he had been sparing with Jesse.

"And why would I want anything to do with a sweaty, grubby man?" Shalimar shot back almost instantly. "You stink."

"I'll second that," Jesse commented as he continued walking away.

Brennan gave a mock hurt look and Shalimar had to laugh; he did the tortured expression very well.

"Ferals," he said with a shake of his head and wandered towards his room.

As the two men departed, Shalimar looked round to see Emma standing off to one side. The two women shared a look and then Shalimar grinned broadly. Operation Get-Jesse-Back seemed to have worked nicely.

====

It was hard to breathe; it felt like a great weight was pushing into his chest and Jesse could not move. His body felt heavy and unresponsive as if he was not quite in control. It was one of the hardest things he had ever done to open his eyes. A blur moved to his left, but he could not track it.

"Sir, the subject is awake," the voice spoke from somewhere close, but Jesse could not identify the source.

A shape loomed over him and Jesse realised he was lying flat on his back.

"Ah, Delta, you show remarkable strength. I had not expected you to be conscious for some time yet," the dark blur spoke to him and Jesse's mind pointed out that his name was not Delta, but he could make no coherent sound to back up this thought. "I imagine you're feeling very disorientated right now; a mind takes time to come into alignment with a new body."

The voice sounded light and pleasant, but what the man was saying sent shots of fear through Jesse's thoughts. He did not understand and he could not make his panic clear.

"Calm down child," the voice continued, "you're perfectly safe. We are your new pack and we are trying to help you."

Pack? The speaker sounded like he was talking to a feral; Jesse was becoming more confused. He could not see properly and he could not move; the whole situation was terrifying.

"Dr Praetese," another voice said, "his heart rate has increased and his blood pressure is going up, shall I abort the procedure?"

"No," the doctor's tone was entirely different when he spoke to the other person and Jesse did not like his voice at all, "the preparations have been made we cannot stop now. He's barely conscious; it is probably just a reaction to his environment."

Jesse wanted to get away; he needed to escape, but his body was beyond his control. He was trapped in a shell that would not obey him and he was overcome with complete, mind numbing fear. There was the sound of high-tech machinery moving and then something cold touched Jesse's chest.

"This may hurt a little, Delta," the doctor's voice had returned to its singsong quality, "but your new body is not quite finished yet and we need to help it grow. The machine assists Maria in connecting with your cells and she then helps your body develop."

The tone was so reasonable and reassuring, but Jesse felt only danger. He was afraid and alone and he wanted his friends. Where were Brennan, Shalimar, Emma and Adam? Why had his family abandoned him to a madman?

At first there was a slightly warm feeling where the machine was in contact with his skin and this sensation spread across his chest and down his limbs. It was not unpleasant until it had reached every part of his body and then he felt all his muscles tighten. Breathing became even more difficult and he was struggling for air, but that was not the worst. Even as he desperately tried to fill his starving lungs sharp stabbing pains took hold of every nerve in his body. It was agony and he could not even cry out his pain.

Jesse sat bolt upright in bed, a scream dying on his lips. He was breathing hard and the terror was so clear in his mind that it took him a good few seconds to remember where he was. Even as he tried to re-orientate himself to his surroundings and banish the nightmare from his mind the door to his room opened rapidly. The silhouette framed by the light from the hall announced the newcomer's identity before she spoke.

"Jesse, are you okay?" Shalimar asked quickly.

He blinked up at her for a moment still trying to escape from the dream.

"I heard you scream," the feral added when he didn't reply.

"Nightmare," Jesse said eventually as his brain caught up with reality.

A second silhouette arrived in the doorway and unlike Shalimar, who could see in the dark, this person flicked on the light. Emma stood just behind the other woman in a robe looking worried.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Jesse apologised profusely when he saw the expressions on the two women's faces.

He felt suddenly guilty as reality made it past the night terrors, but there wasn't much he could have done to prevent the situation.

"Never mind about us," Emma said rapidly as the two women moved further into the room, "what about you? You were terrified, Jesse; I felt it from the other end of the corridor."

"Just a dream," he promised even though the images from his brain still haunted him, "I'm fine."

He pushed the covers down the bed and swung his legs onto the floor; somehow lying down was the last thing he wanted to do just then.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Emma asked, ever the psychoanalyst, and Jesse did not think he had much of a choice as the women flanked him and sat down on the bed either side of where he was sitting.

Bits of the memory were fading, but nevertheless, thinking about it was not a comfortable experience for Jesse. He was not sure if he wanted to share his fear, but he didn't want to be left alone either.

"I think I was remembering the first time I woke up," he eventually began, "after..." he paused, unwilling to voice the truth of his creation. "I don't think I was supposed to."

He let the recollections file through his head and neither of the women pushed him.

"I couldn't breathe properly and I couldn't move," Jesse found it was easier to admit this than when he had first started talking. There were waves of calm coming from Emma and they were comforting; he appreciated her effort. "There were at least three people there," he continued before the memory could slip away, "and one spoke to me. He called me Delta."

The nightmare was fading and Jesse was trying to pick out details as he suddenly felt there was something important he was forgetting.

"I wasn't finished," he said a little confused and paused again. "Mutant," he said slowly, "he was using a new mutant to finish the clone; Maria."

Jesse stared into Shalimar's eyes as he suddenly found the piece of information he was trying so desperately to recover.

"His name is Praeteise," he said firmly. "The asshole who dragged me out of my body is called Praeteise and he wasn't at the test facility when it blew."

Shalimar and Emma shared a look and then nodded as if they had come to a decision. Jesse didn't need to be a mind reader to know what it was and he was also pretty sure that they'd needed the consensus because they were worried about him. It was nice to be cared about, but in this case it was unnecessary.

"Let's find him," Shalimar said firmly and as one the three of them stood up.

End of Chapter 4

Chapter 5 The Whole Truth

Adam walked into the computer area to find three of his team standing around at various terminals in their nightclothes; it was unexpected to say the least.

"Good morning," he greeted politely and was rewarded by all three looking round at him.

Jesse and Shalimar were working on one computer and Emma was working on another; they all appeared a little surprised to see him.

"Is it that time already?" Shalimar asked in a manner that suggested she was fighting off a vaguely bad mood.

"Actually it is still early," Adam told her calmly, "I did not expect anyone else to be up. May I ask what you're doing?"

"Jesse had a dream," Emma explained, walking away from whatever she had been doing, "he remembered a name. We're trying to track the man down, but the files aren't giving anything back."

"And that name was?" Adam enquired with interest.

"Praeteise," Jesse provided the answer and the way he said the name conveyed a hatred Adam had never heard in the young man's voice before.

It did not, however, stop him recognising that name, but it confused him.

"Dr Tom Praeteise?" Adam asked before he realised it was quite possibly a stupid question.

Now he had everyone's attention.

"We didn't exactly swap pleasantries," was Jesse's somewhat caustic reply. "You know him?"

"If it's the same man, I know of him," Adam replied evenly, "and I suspect the reason you have not found him is that he has been listed as dead for twenty years."

Neither Jesse nor Shalimar appeared best pleased with that development and Emma frowned at Adam speculatively.

"Who is he?" the telepath asked reasonably.

"One of the pioneers at Genomex," he explained openly and moved to one of the computers, "he was working with biological elementals to aid in medicine. The equipment he was using to interface his subjects to his patients exploded about six months into the project; the only listed survivor was Maria Montoban – one of his new mutant volunteers."

He typed rapidly at the keyboard and retrieved the file on Praeteise, displaying it on the larger screen for the others to see. The picture was a typical personnel file mug shot, but the way Jesse's face went pale Adam knew it was enough.

"That's him," the young man said coldly. "I don't remember when I saw him, but I remember his face and in the dream he spoke to someone called Maria."

Jesse paused and frowned as if he was trying hard to make something clear in his mind.

"He didn't look any older," Jesse finally decided.

This was becoming stranger by the minute. Adam was really confused by this; Praeteise was dead; he had been one of the employees who attended the funeral. But then again he had attended another funeral only a few weeks ago that had not been real.

"Praeteise's reputation was spotless," Adam tried to clarify his reasoning by explaining to the others. "His research was aimed only at the common good and all his test subjects and patients were willing volunteers."

While he spoke he continued typing and set the computer to search for Maria Montoban.

"Your work was for the common good as well, Adam," Shalimar pointed out while placing a protective hand on Jesse's shoulder, "but look where that got us. I think Praeteise is playing for the bad guys now."

Adam had read several papers by Praeteise on his work and he had gained the impression of a compassionate man dedicated to using the mistakes Genomex had made in the past to make the future a better place. Equating him with what had been done to Jesse was difficult, but there did not appear to be any doubt. He considered the possibility as the latest information on Maria Montoban flashed onto the screen. The part that gained his attention was the red warning "Missing".

"That settles it," Emma said firmly. "Praeteise is using his work for black ops and Maria is with him."

The evidence was piling up and Adam no longer doubted it.

"We should set up some tracers," he decided quickly, "and then I shall make some phone calls."

====

"The watchdogs are bound to show up something soon," Emma said confidently as she and Jesse walked out of the lab. "If Maria Montoban so much as breathes on a computer anywhere in the world we'll know about it."

"Yeah, but what if she's as much a prisoner as I was?" Jesse commented not in such an optimistic mood.

"Then the searches will find her for us," the telepath said firmly and Jesse was not sure if she really believed that or was just putting on a front for his benefit.

The pair walked into the rec area and Jesse turned away from the conversation just in time to see Brennan and Shalimar sharing a moment. The relationship between the feral and the elemental had been difficult to define; always a would they, wouldn't they thing, but Jesse's 'death' had pushed them closer together. The pair were a lot more than friends these days, which was something Jesse had

thought he was comfortable with, but what caused him to freeze on the spot was the irrational jealousy that suddenly surged through him. For a split second he felt like leaping over the chair in front of him and staking his own claim.

That in itself would have been startling, but he was slowly getting a handle on the wild, semi-latent, feline feral emotions that jumped to the surface every now and then. What really caught him off guard was who the jealousy was aimed at. Jesse realised that he was not jealous at Brennan because he had Shalimar, he was jealous at Shalimar because she had Brennan. When he had finally figured out that Shalimar and Brennan were a couple after his awakening Jesse had been pleased for them. His emotional response now was a total shock.

As if sensing what was going on, Shalimar turned towards him and her eyes flashed amber. Jesse felt his own body respond as feral faced feral, but he was so stunned he could not move. The two stared at each other for a moment and, after the initial reaction, Jesse saw Shalimar realise what was going on. It was more than Jesse could cope with just then and he mildly panicked.

"I ... ah ..." he said hesitantly, "have ... stuff to do."

Then he turned away from the others and removed himself from the room.

====

Shalimar just stood there and watched Jesse leave, letting the feral instincts die down. She was just as shocked as Jesse had appeared and her human side did not really know what to do about it. She had sensed a rival and she had seen Jesse react to her the same way. His eyes had flashed bright amber and jealousy had been coming off him in waves. This was something Shalimar had not expected and when it came to feral-feral relations this was huge.

"What's gotten into him?" Brennan asked from behind her, obviously confused by the whole incident.

"I think his feral just jumped up and bit him," Shalimar said quickly before Emma could say anything. "You and me were probably giving off enough pheromones to wake the dead."

She turned to Brennan and smiled as if making light of the whole situation even though on the inside she was still confused by it.

"I'll go talk to him," she said cheerfully. "He's probably embarrassed as hell."

She looked back at Emma and made it plain that she wanted to handle it. The telepath seemed unsure for a few seconds, but finally smiled.

"Sounds like a good idea," Emma agreed, but the look she gave Shalimar as the feral walked past by told her to be careful.

Normally when it came to rivals for a mate Shalimar would simply see them off, but when the rival turned out to be Jesse things were not that simple. Trying to fight down her more primitive instinct the woman set off to find her teammate.

He had disappeared fast, but hiding from a feral with a mission was nigh on impossible in a closed environment. Shalimar followed Jesse's trail to one of the bathrooms and found him leaning on the sink with water dripping from his face.

He did not turn to look at her when she came in. For a few moments she just stood there looking at him, not quite clear in her own mind what to do now she had found him. Her deepest instincts told her that Jesse was a rival for Brennan and she shouldn't give him the time of day, but her protective side was still very much aware that the young man was in need of her help.

"Jesse," she said eventually, "we have to talk about this."

That drew a snort of a laugh from Jesse, but he still did not look at Shalimar.

"What's to talk about?" he asked in a self-depreciating manner.

He did not look as if he was in any mood to discuss this, but then Shalimar suspected that Jesse was unlikely to ever be fond of the idea.

"You can't ignore it," Shalimar said pointedly.

Now Jesse turned to look at her and his eyes flashed amber.

"I can if I want to," he said harshly, sounding somewhere between petulant and desperate.

Jesse went to walk out of the room, but she put her arm up to stop him. This was important and Shalimar was going to see it done.

"Whether you like it or not you're feral now," she said pointedly. "The one thing you can't do is ignore what you're feeling or it will come back and haunt you."

"Yeah well I've been ignoring what I've been feeling for my entire life, I'm very practiced at it," Jesse spat back his eyes flashing yellow again.

That caused Shalimar to pause; it had not occurred to her that this was not just another facet of the changes Jesse had been put through. She had never considered that her companion was anything but a heterosexual male; Shalimar had never noticed anything from him in the past when it came to other men. Added to the fact that Jesse had appeared so shocked at the situation and Shalimar had simply decided this was another new hurdle to step over.

"You're bi?" Shal asked evenly without trying to hide her surprise. "But back there you felt so ... so ..."

"Stunned," Jesse finished for her a little less angrily. "I'm not exactly bi," he continued, "I've never acted on any of the feelings. I was different enough as a kid, I decided at a very young age that being anything but straight would be a very bad idea. Hence I have focused my interests only on girls."

He paused and Shalimar waited patiently for him to go on.

"I have just never thought of Brennan in that way ... ever," Jesse admitted eventually. "He's your territory and so straight you could draw lines with him."

"Jess," Shalimar said leaning against the wall, "until today I'd have said similar things about you."

They stood in silence for a while, Jesse staring blankly into the mirror and Shalimar gazing at the opposite wall. This was a complicated situation and Shalimar did not know exactly how to deal with it.

"Ignoring it won't work," she said finally. "You're feral and wild feral at that; you've had no time to get a handle on that part of your personality. If you stick your head in the sand your inner animal is going to jump up and bite you on the ass, and probably try and take me as well. Jesse we've had this conversation before."

Jesse glared at her and looked very dubious; Shalimar did not think he quite believed her.

"Brennan's mine," she said with a calculated smile.

Her companion's eyes flashed in return.

"Told you," she said having made her point.

He did not look completely convinced, but at least now Jesse was listening to her. Standing there looking at his completely bewildered face brought all of Shalimar's compassion for her teammate to the surface and it brought something with it. It was the barest hint of an emotion that Shalimar had never really considered and it gave her an idea.

"What if you weren't a rival?" she said half to herself and half to Jesse.

This made the younger man look even more confused and he was in no mood to handle it; the anger returned to his expression.

"Now you're talking in riddles," Jesse snapped tersely. "You said I couldn't ignore this so how the hell do I unfeel it?"

"You don't," Shalimar said evenly and let a smile curve her lips as the idea coalesced in her mind and she found she liked it.

With calm calculation she turned to face Jesse and stepped towards him. Allowing the sexual predator inside her to the surface, she set her sights on Jesse. For his part the younger man tried to back away.

"Shalimar, what are you doing?" he asked and in his confusion at the sudden change in the situation he seemed to have forgotten to be angry.

"Changing you from rival to mate," she said in a perfectly logical tone.

"But you and Brennan...", Jesse was beginning to sound desperate, "...and you made it very clear a long time ago I was not your type."

Shalimar took another step towards her companion and Jesse ran out of backing room.

"You'd be amazed how open minded Brennan can be," she said slowly, never taking her eyes off Jesse's face, "and your type has changed."

Opening her feral senses to him, Shalimar could feel just how much that was true. She had never let herself consider him as anything but a little brother

before. She had never lied to him; the one and only time he had ever made advances she had told him openly that he was not her type, but Jesse was very different now.

"Shalimar, we can't do this," Jesse tried again and he almost sounded like he believed it.

Looking directly into his eyes, Shalimar sent him every signal she knew how and she saw his nostril's flare. Jesse's feral was only partially emerged and most of his senses were relatively normal, but using her knowledge that his sense of smell was greatly enhanced Shalimar decided it was time to play the trump card.

"You can smell him on me can't you Jesse?" she whispered to him. "You can smell Brennan all over me. He smells good doesn't he Jesse? Musky and male. I reek of him Jesse. What does that make you want to do?"

She moved in as close as she could without pushing Jesse over the bathtub.

"Touch me and you touch part of him," Shalimar continued, never letting up with her own sex appeal for a second.

She saw it the moment Jesse's will crumbled and his eyes flashed as his instincts took over. Shalimar found herself picked up bodily and pinned to the wall with Jesse pressed up against her. His lips pushed against hers and she parted them, letting them taste each other. Her own feral revelled in the sensations running through her body and she lost herself in the kiss and the moment. Shalimar had absolutely no doubts that this was the right thing to do.

She was so caught up in the experience that when Jesse freed her from his grip and backed away, she took a moment to return to the present. When Shalimar looked at Jesse's face she saw doubt and fear mixed in with a very real hunger. It was obvious that she had succeeded in her bid to arouse her companion, but Shalimar realised she had not quite succeeded in convincing him this was a good idea.

"We can't," he said slowly and very reluctantly. "Brennan ..."

Jesse was obviously having problems expressing what he was feeling and for a split second Shalimar shared his doubt, but then wiped it away. If she had not been sure of her actions she would never have chosen the course and she was not about to give up now.

"Rival or mate, Jesse," Shalimar said evenly, "your choice."

He looked so torn and Shalimar could sympathise, but she had already chosen her path.

"We can deal with Brennan together when we are on the same side," she said eventually. "Territorial ferals will get one of us killed. Let the instinct free, Jesse, we'll handle the consequences together."

The younger mutant just stared her in the face and she could see the war going on behind his eyes. Shalimar knew how difficult it could be to balance a wild nature with the human value system and she for one was sure that this time nature was the winner. Finally Jesse nodded and the tension flowed out of him.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, when he opened them his irises were yellowy orange.

"Let's do it," he said quietly.

Shalimar reached out her hand and took Jesse's, and then she led him into the corridor.

====

Brennan had spent an hour with Emma and every time he went to leave she had reengaged him in conversation, but in the end he had given her an excuse and left. He had expected Shalimar to be a few minutes, maybe half an hour, but not this long. He appreciated that she had to help Jesse with his new powers, but they had been in the middle of something and Brennan had hoped she would have come back.

Not sure if Shalimar and Jesse would have finished their discussion, but wanting to find out what was going on, Brennan set about trying to find the pair. He tried just about everywhere he could think of including both his friend's rooms with no luck so he finally headed over to his own space. He found the door closed and locked, which was most confusing. He knocked on the door wondering if he would receive an answer.

One thing the elemental really didn't expect was the door sliding back to reveal a completely naked Shalimar. Her eyes were yellow and all Brennan could think was that he was looking at some wild nature goddess. Her hair was rumped and there were signs of arousal all over her body as well as what looked like love bites. Dragging his thoughts from the hormonal hole they had found, the penny dropped in Brennan's mind and he suddenly realised why Shalimar had never come back, but he had no chance to really react.

"Wondered when you'd get here," Shalimar said with a hungry smile and, before Brennan could do anything about it, she reached out, grabbed the front of his jeans and pulled him into the room.

Inside the lights were down low and the door shut out any other light as the feral pushed him down on to the bed. Brennan found himself doubting the conclusion he had come to, but, as his eyes adjusted, he caught sight of another figure in the room. Shalimar straddled Brennan on the bed and pinned him down, leaning over him and looking into his face with her ever-changing eyes. It didn't take a genius to realise that Shalimar was under the full influence of her feral nature.

Brennan didn't know what to think and he needed answers even though he knew it would be hard to get Shalimar to explain. Instead he went for the other option.

"Jesse is that you?" he asked firmly as Shalimar tried to unbutton his shirt.

"Of course it's him," the Shalimar said openly, "we were just thinking of coming to look for you."

Shalimar did not exactly sound rational and Brennan began to think he might be in trouble.

"Shalimar," Brennan said pointedly, trying to find the human side of the feral, "what's going on."

"Rival or mate," the woman said as if it explained everything.

Brennan took hold of her hands and held them.

"Jesse, explain to me why I shouldn't fry you right now," he said looking for answers from the only other person in the room.

When the younger mutant stepped out from where he had been standing with Shalimar blocking the view it occurred to Brennan that he was going to get even less sense from Jesse. The blond man was as naked as Shalimar and his eyes were golden.

"He loves you," Shalimar said brightly and pulled her hands from his grip.

That bewildered Brennan even more.

"And sleeping with you, in my room, is his way of showing it?" He was almost too confused to be angry, but not quite.

"Rival or mate," Shalimar said for the second time.

The feral finally seemed to catch up with the fact that she was not making any sense when Brennan looked at her blankly.

"Before, out there, was not to do with me," she said her hands still trying to find the buttons on Brennan's shirt, "it was you. He was jealous of me because of you. There was only one way to resolve it."

As far as Brennan was concerned that was definitely a feral outlook on life and if he had been the one looking for solutions he could have found another one. As it was he just wanted to figure out what was going on at that moment in time.

"And now?" Brennan asked pointedly.

"Now we seduce you and problem solved," Shalimar said with a hungry smile and totally scandalised his sensibilities.

Now Brennan sat up and pushed Shalimar back. She drew her legs up under her and crouched on the bed looming above him like a giant bird.

"This is crazy," he said bluntly.

"Why?" Shalimar asked, still smiling broadly.

This appeared to be a game to the feral and she was enjoying it. Jesse was still waiting in the background and Brennan had the feeling that the pair had a plan. Brennan couldn't deny that the naked presence of two ferals in the room was having an effect on him, but his brain was still crying out in outrage. A threesome was something that had occurred to him in his wilder days, but quite frankly he'd usually pictured it as him and two girls, not him and a guy and a girl. Besides which, this was Jesse and Shalimar; Shalimar yes, but Jesse? The idea was so far from left field that it made Brennan's head spin.

"I can smell your arousal," Shalimar whispered loudly. "Go with the desire. Don't you want me?"

When she took hold of the belt on his pants Brennan didn't reach to stop her. She undid it slowly and then moved on to the button fly. Shalimar bent her head to her work and Brennan found himself looking at Jesse once more. The blond man had his head turned to one side and he was watching intently; more than ever Brennan was aware that he was in a room with two people who were not exactly running on human instincts.

Brennan had seen Shalimar like this before, it was how she was when her sexual appetite was highly aroused, but Jesse had never had this side before. Looking at the other mutant he could feel the arousal coming off the younger man; he appeared even less in control of his animal instincts than Shalimar.

When Shalimar took hold of the top of Brennan's pants and pulled downwards, he was in two minds as to whether to let her continue, but he did not resist and Shalimar was very persistent. Eventually Brennan lifted his hips off the bed and with a growl of delight Shalimar removed the jeans in one swift movement, somehow taking his shoes with them.

The whole situation still did not feel right to Brennan, but Shalimar was definitely having a certain effect on him in the state she was in. He was more than a little uncomfortable with the fact that Jesse was in the room, but Shalimar was doing a good job of keeping him distracted. When Shalimar had relieved him of his pants she set about his shirt again. The fact that she was following up each unfastening with a kiss where the button had been almost made him forget that they were not alone.

Shalimar seemed to realise that he was not quite in the moment and, as she pushed his shirt off his shoulders, she raised her head and looked him directly in the eye. The wicked smile on her face told Brennan that she was completely committed to this. The fact there was a deep love coupled with the pure lust in her expression did not escape him either; this was not just sex to her.

"Close your eyes," she said in a husky low tone.

Looking into golden irises, Brennan knew that this was his last chance to back out; if he closed his eyes he was in for the ride. Brennan really wasn't sure what he was getting into, but as Shalimar nuzzled his cheek with her nose, he gave in to his baser instincts. Putting his head back, he closed his eyes and Shalimar kissed him full on the lips. Then he felt something touch his temple; opening his eyes again he could see nothing.

"Shal..." the feral put her finger on his lips before Brennan could ask what was going on; the visual cloak was something very unexpected.

"Just relax," she whispered back and pushed him down onto the bed.

Being unable to see made Brennan a little nervous, but when Shalimar turned her attention to his chest, he discovered that there were advantages; with his eyes out of action his sense of touch was going into overtime. When she nipped at his skin it sent little rivulets of pleasure through his whole torso, and her hair brushed across his chest in the most delightful fashion. Brennan really didn't care that he and Shalimar were not alone when she moved further down; he did not even hesitate to help when she pulled off his underwear.

Shalimar broke contact with him for a moment and then she was back, her fingertips running down his side lightly. The touch was incredible and Brennan lost himself in the feeling as the delicate fingers ran down his legs and Shalimar returned to the bed at the end. Gentle pressure on the inside of his ankles urged Brennan to part his legs and he did so without thought. His companion moved into the space, but still the only contact was the insistent fingers.

Brennan dug his nails into the mattress as the touch moved upwards and the delicate pressure ran across the sensitive skin behind his balls. He felt his body react to the contact and he moaned as the fingers moved up over his scrotum and then the shaft. Naked Shalimar had already given him a healthy erection, but the touch brought his body to life. Then he totally forgot about anything, but the experience as a tongue joined the fingers. The stroking was feather light and Brennan moved into the touch and was rewarded, but the sensation of lips encircling him.

The groan that escaped his mouth was heartfelt and totally uncontrollable. Brennan's artificial blindness was heightening the sensation for him and, as the mouth and fingers worked, all he could do was go with the flow. The tiny, still functioning, logical part of his brain gave thanks that their rooms were now soundproofed, well unless you had feral hearing, and the rest of his brain let go of anything resembling rational thought. He lost all track of time as the touch continued to drive him crazy with movement after movement. His body had a whole mind of its own and he wound his hands into the bed sheet as he arched his back. It was then that he felt it, the brush of a cheek on his thigh and a hard torso against the rest of his leg. Just as his orgasm took him and his mind decided to disconnect, he realised that his partner on the bed was not Shalimar. He had no chance to figure out when the ferals had pulled the switch, because he was far too busy concentrating on the muscle spasms that had taken over his whole body, but one thing he was sure of was that Shalimar did not have stubble.

When Brennan finally came down from his sexual high to a manageable level, he reached up slowly and pulled the visual cloak from his temple. He blinked once and came face to face with a yellow-eyed Jesse who was now leaning over him from a position between his legs. The expression on the younger man's face was caught between pleasure and triumph and Brennan felt very much the centre of attention. It was Shalimar who broke the moment of stillness as she climbed onto the bed behind Jesse and pulled him away, pinning him to the wall and kissing him soundly. All Brennan could do was lie there and watch them since his leg was caught behind the younger of the two.

Watching the two ferals was like seeing a pair of wild animals lost in an ancient mating dance. They were totally unselfconscious and Shalimar bodily dragged Jesse off the bed, a move to which he did not appear to object. Shalimar appeared to be playing the dominant role now and she pushed her partner onto the carpet, climbing on top of him. Without so much as a pause she pushed herself down onto Jesse's erection and drew a similar sound from the blond man as he had been drawing from Brennan less than a minute before.

It was quite an intoxicating sight and Brennan found that far from feeling left out now, the display of complete abandon pulled him into the experience further. This was not two individuals showing off their sexual prowess; this was Jesse and Shalimar showing him how much they trusted him. The two ferals had their guards down completely and Brennan watched, fascinated as the two moved together in sexual union.

It did not take long before Brennan found himself again reacting to the situation as his spent body once again became hard. As if Shalimar was reading his mind she lifted herself off Jesse and languidly moved down the younger mutant's body until she was straddling his feet and her head with level with his crotch. Then she looked back at Brennan and literally stuck her rear end in the air. The come on was obvious.

Brennan did not need asking twice and he moved down onto the floor to join the other two. Shalimar moved until he was comfortably positioned behind her and then she bent her head down to do for Jesse what the blond man had previously done for Brennan. Brennan took his cue and, reaching out, he gently held Shalimar's waist and moved in closer. She was soft, slick and warm around his erection and he slid in easily as she pushed back against him.

The three moved together in harmony like one creature bent on only one thing; sexual gratification. Jesse came first with what sounded to Brennan almost like a growl of pleasure. Shalimar was next as she pushed back onto Brennan hard and spasmed around him with an indulgent moan and her movements pushed him over the edge a second time. His sex charged body had the decency to display little stars in front of his eyes as he gave in to orgasm once again. He collapsed onto the floor next to Jesse as his legs made it known that twice in such close succession was too much for sensible motor control.

Shalimar sat back on her haunches and grinned at Brennan and Jesse; it appeared to Brennan that the woman was suffering no such ill effects from her exertions.

"Beautiful men," she said with a sexy laugh, "my men."

Something about the way she said it gave Brennan the impression that sex was far from over and he wondered briefly if he would survive the experience.

=====

Brennan had lost track of time shortly after his second orgasm, he also wasn't sure exactly what mutant chemistry his feral partners were putting into the room, but it beat the hell out of anything he had experienced before, even with Shalimar. It was all about sensation and that was all that mattered for the longest time.

Only as he began to come down slightly did Brennan realise that, although all three of them were on the bed and were definitely in contact, he was in fact concentrating mostly on Shalimar. The female feral was lavishing her attentions on both Jesse and himself, but Brennan was fixated on the woman and Jesse appeared to be respecting this choice. This suddenly seemed wrong. Coming up for air from a passionate kiss with Shalimar, Brennan looked her in the eyes and then smiled.

"Move over," he said quietly.

Shalimar ginned back and without hesitation shifted her weight and rolled above him, supporting herself with her arms and legs. Brennan scooted over towards a surprised looking Jesse and Shalimar came down behind Brennan. Without waiting for the blond man to react, Brennan took his friend's face in his hands and kissed him hard on the lips. Jesse didn't take long to catch up and he opened his mouth to accept Brennan's probing tongue. Brennan had never kissed a man

before and it was quite different from kissing a woman. Stubble for a start was a new sensation and Brennan found he rather liked the contrast of rough hair and soft lips.

Brennan was so wrapped up in the experience that he forgot quite how close to the edge of the bed he was, as too it appeared did Jesse. The pair rolled over with Brennan on top and then there was a muffled squeak from Jesse as they were both falling. They were tangled together and Brennan could not extract himself, in fact he found his body wrapped by Jesse's frame and when they hit the floor there was a very loud thud. His first thought was for his lover since Brennan had landed with all his weight on top of the blond man, but when he tried to extract himself he found that Jesse was still holding on. It then occurred to Brennan that Jesse's body had felt very solid when they had landed and he realised the other mutant had massed out during the fall.

The younger man was looking a little startled, but was otherwise completely unaffected. Brennan decided to show his appreciation at being saved and wiped away the shocked expression from his partner's face by kissing him soundly. Quite deliberately as the kiss deepened Brennan rubbed his erection against Jesse's.

The move drew a groan from the younger mutant and, as Brennan pulled back slightly to appreciate his handiwork, all he could see was the look of hungry desire in the other man's eyes. The expression on Jesse's face at that moment was the most wanton pleasure Brennan had seen on anyone but Shalimar and the blond man moved his legs so he and the elemental were as close to each other as they could get. The pair shared a gaze and Brennan knew without a doubt what Jesse really wanted.

Throughout his considerable sexual experience Brennan had never had sex with a man, but he was aware of the logistics of the act. Not sure if he would find what he needed, he lifted himself away from Jesse and glanced at Shalimar. She smiled broadly at him and held out a small tube; it appeared they were prepared for anything.

With unspoken accord Jesse flipped over as Brennan opened the lube. Smearing it on his fingers he rubbed it gently around the offered orifice. Jesse moaned quietly and Brennan didn't need to be told to move things on. Pushing gently he forced one finger past the tight ring of muscle of Jesse's ass and was rewarded by what almost sounded like a growl. It was filled with such need that nothing else but fulfilling that need entered Brennan's head. He worked Jesse loose, first with one finger then two and when Jesse pushed back on his hand forcefully, Brennan knew that the time for playing games was over. Quite sure of what he was doing now, he positioned himself behind the younger man and then with the utmost care he found Jesse's opening and pushed in.

The action drew a grunt from Jesse and Brennan paused as tight muscles constricted slightly around his erection. He could not be sure, but Brennan did not think Jesse had done this before any more than he had. It took a few seconds, but he felt his partner relax into the sensation and Brennan took that as his cue to continue.

He had never made love to anyone with such a blatant audience before, but Brennan found that even though he could feel Shalimar's eyes watching every move he had no will to be self-conscious. In fact, being under such close scrutiny made him want this all the more and he could not resist giving the female

member of their trio a grin. Brennan was living in a sex soaked haze and he was loving every second and with a will to make sure his partners were enjoying this as much as he was he returned to his task.

Brennan moved slowly, on the alert for any signs of discomfort from his lover, but this time there was no grunt, only a deep groan of pleasure. He sank in about half way and then pulled out again; the noises this drew from Jesse were encouragement enough to continue.

With gentle care Brennan pushed in and pulled out a few more times and as he felt Jesse becoming used to the intrusion he thrust a little harder. This time he sank in as far as he could go and the response from his lover was a slightly startled moan that caused the younger man to pull away a little. Brennan was afraid he might have hurt Jesse until his lover pushed back against him again. Jesse seemed to want to take everything that he could give and Brennan set about making sure Jesse had his wish. The pair moved with one accord apart and together time after time and Brennan closed his eyes, giving in to the moment.

The tightness of Jesse's muscles had eased, but even so Brennan knew he could not last much longer with the amount of sensation he was receiving from the younger man. But he need not have worried that Jesse was far behind him because, as Brennan thrust a couple more times, the younger man went rigid and then shuddered with a half surprised cry. It took only one more plunge from Brennan to join his lover and then they both collapsed onto the floor.

It was long seconds before Brennan summoned enough motor control to move in any sensible manner. Then he pulled out of Jesse slowly and pushed himself up to a kneeling position using the side of the bed. Shalimar rewarded him for his efforts with a light kiss. She seemed to realise that he was finally spent and her touch was gentle rather than demanding. When he looked back down, Jesse was lying on his side and younger man's eyes were closed with a look of ecstasy on his face. Shalimar helped Brennan back onto the bed as he tried to stop various muscles from shaking.

=====

Brennan opened his eyes suddenly as he found himself breathing hair. He pushed his face backwards and discovered he was looking at the back of Shalimar's head. His back was against the wall and one arm was draped over his female lover and the other lying across the top of the bed. Further down the bed things were a little more complicated; as Brennan found when he tried to move. A heavy weight was pinning his legs and, when he glanced down, his eyes found Jesse. Their third was sort of between them, draped half over Shalimar and half on Brennan's legs where he was laying further down the bed.

Jesse appeared absurdly young with his face relaxed in sleep and it occurred to Brennan that technically the mutant was less than two months old. It made him laugh, which was quite difficult from his current position. Shalimar stirred immediately and twisted her upper body round into what looked like a very uncomfortable position. She seemed quite happy, however, as she smiled at Brennan.

"Glad you're in such high spirits," she said quietly, sounding much more human again.

"Just wondering if we've been cradle snatching?" Brennan replied in a whisper.

Shalimar glanced down at the still peacefully sleeping Jesse and smiled fondly; Brennan found that his own feelings were remarkably similar. He let himself be lost in the moment for a while and then shook himself into wakefulness; it had after all been the middle of the afternoon when they had started all this.

"How long have we been asleep?" he asked quickly.

Shalimar reached out carefully and turned the clock on the table to face them both. It read six fifteen.

"Couple of hours," Shalimar decided quickly. "I wonder if the other two have decided to look for us yet?"

"I think Emma might have handled that for us," Brennan said with a grin, "she ran interference for the pair of you for long enough."

"What else are friends for?" Shalimar quipped back. "Time to wake sleeping beauty I suppose; we need to get back to work."

"I could give him a little jolt," Brennan offered cheerfully and let his fingers spark.

Shalimar laughed.

"Oh I think you gave him a big enough jolt earlier," she joked lightly, "besides which he's venomous, remember?"

"And he's awake," a sleepy voice came from Jesse.

The younger mutant moved and then groaned.

"I think my head may be stuck at the wrong angle," he complained quietly.

"Yeah well I may never walk again," Brennan shot back cheerfully, "but I'm sure we can learn to live with these things. How about getting off my legs?"

"Give me a minute to figure out how to move?" Jesse said, but did shift towards the front of the bed as Shalimar swung her legs off the piece of furniture.

"Note to self," Brennan said as he felt sensation start back in his right leg, "get a bigger bed."

"Now that is a conversation I want to see," Jesse commented and slowly stood up, "Adam's eyebrows will hit his hairline if he asks why."

The mental image that gave Brennan made his chuckle; it would be something to see.

"I call the shower first," he decided quickly at which point Shalimar climbed to her feet and turned around.

"And whatever happened to manners?" she said raising one eyebrow and placing her hands on her hips.

She was a magnificent sight and Brennan took a moment to admire her; he saw Jesse doing the same. Funnily enough this no longer struck him as wrong; it was quite a reversal in thinking for him, but Brennan chose not to question it.

"We could always take one together," Jesse said with a very mischievous smile.

"Yeah and then we'll never get back to work," was Brennan's concise opinion on the matter. "Just to show I'm not a complete barbarian; ladies first."

====

Emma was sitting in the rec area analysing the game of chess she had played against Adam earlier. Her playing style was always improving, but she still couldn't beat the leader of Mutant X. This time she hadn't exactly intended to challenge him, but when he had come out of the lab looking for Jesse, Emma had explained that Jesse and Shalimar were having a heart to heart and then distracted the man with the game. Of course Emma had been aware of exactly what Shalimar, Brennan and Jesse had been about, but luckily Adam had not enquired further.

Making sure that her three friends had their privacy had come naturally to Emma, but she was not quite sure how she felt about the whole situation. When Shalimar had followed Jesse out of the rec room, Emma had never suspected what would result, especially when the pair had involved Brennan as well. It was absurd really, but at first she felt a little left out. It wasn't that she wanted to be part of the group really; it was just that they were usually a team and in this they weren't.

She was as horny as hell thanks to what the three were up to, but she had no desire to go and join them. She'd deal with that problem herself when she could be alone; it wasn't like it was the first time her power had ever left her hot and bothered thanks to someone else's activities. When you picked up strong emotions from a relatively large radius you learned to deal with these things.

It had in fact been quite a pleasant afternoon and Emma had enjoyed Adam's company. It seemed like it had been so long since they had had a chance to relax and the game of chess had been fun. It had taken the older man quite some time to win the game and it had been pleasant. Emma just hoped that her friends' activities would have no unfortunate repercussions.

Jesse appeared first and the smile on his face said everything really. If Emma had not been able to feel the happiness oozing from his every pore then that expression would have given it all away. If he was anything to go by then Emma was willing to believe that maybe the whole situation was going to work out.

"Your mood seems to have improved," Emma commented with mock innocence.

Jesse just grinned at her.

"You know what," he replied cheerfully and threw himself down on the chair next to hers, "I think you may be right."

Emma couldn't help but smile at him; his mood was infectious.

"How was your afternoon?" the blond mutant asked conversationally.

"Fine thank you," she replied in kind, "but don't expect me to ask how yours was."

That gained her a laugh from her companion; for the first time since they had found him Jesse felt completely relaxed, as if he was content. Emma hadn't really felt that from the blond mutant since Amanda had been killed.

"You're no fun," Jesse quipped back with a mischievous glint in his eye.

"Yes well while you three were 'busy'," Emma said deliberately avoiding the whole subject, "I was trying to beat Adam at chess. He was looking for you so you owe me one."

"I changed my mind," Jesse said lightly, "you're an angel. So did you beat him?"

Emma sent her companion a look that said 'what do you think' and did not deign to answer straight away. Jesse just grinned at her unrepentantly.

"I think in about fifty years I might have a chance," she said eventually with a rueful smile.

"Nah," her friend said lightly, "not more than twenty five, surely?"

For that she threw a cushion at him and he caught it while laughing like a schoolboy. If the other two were on as much of a high as Jesse Emma decided she was in for an exhausting evening.

End of Part 5

Chapter 6 Nothing But the Truth

Jesse wandered into the lab and hopped up onto the examination couch; he was very much used to the routine these days. The daily checkups were more a habit now than an annoyance, but he was hoping that sooner or later they would be cut down again. Adam had assured him that the scans were more for just making sure that everything was okay rather than significant treatment so Jesse was hopeful that things would go back to normal soon.

"Morning, Jesse," Adam said calmly, turning from where he has been examining a work station, "ready for your scan."

"As always, Adam," he replied brightly.

Jesse was in a good mood and he had decided to just ride the high; it made a change these days.

"Okay, you know the drill," the older man instructed calmly, "this will only take a few seconds."

Jesse lay back and closed his eyes, feeling the beam as it riffled through his DNA. It was a pleasant, kind of tingly sensation and he rather enjoyed it. When it ended, he just lay there letting the feeling fade.

"Jesse," Adam sounded intrigued and it broke Jesse out of his reverie, "what exactly were you doing with Shalimar yesterday?"

Jesse sat up and turned around trying not to look embarrassed.

"Why?" he hedged quickly.

"Because your feral DNA has evolved and your hormone levels are almost off the scale," Adam replied evenly and looked Jesse straight in the eye.

Jesse felt his face colour and he really wasn't sure what to say; it wasn't as if he could just explain.

"Jesse," Adam said patiently and walked away from the screen, "Emma told me that you had a reaction to Shalimar and Brennan yesterday, does this have something to do with that?"

He opened his mouth to say something, but no words came to mind and his face was burning. This had not been a scenario that Jesse had even considered; that his activities would have an effect on his genetic structure had not exactly occurred to him although, thinking about it now, he knew he should have realised.

"If I don't know what is affecting you I can't be sure I'm helping you, Jesse," Adam said calmly. "Were you working on your feral side with Shalimar?"

"You could say that," Jesse said before his brain caught up with his mouth.

Adam gave him a long hard look and he realised that he was going to have to talk fast to get out of this.

"Jesse," the scientist said firmly, "what were you doing with Shalimar yesterday afternoon? I need to know."

Jesse found his eyes slipping to the door, but he knew there was no way out. He desperately tried to find some way of explaining, but he was out of options.

"Sex," he finally said as if the word was forced out of him.

For a moment Adam just looked at him as if he hadn't heard what Jesse said, but eventually the older man moved.

"You and Shalimar," the scientist said slowly and let the sentence hang.

Jesse took a deep breath and decided that he might as well go the whole hog.

"And Brennan," he said as quickly as he could manage and still get the words out.

He did not try and meet his mentor's eyes. There was silence for a good few seconds.

"Well this is something I had not expected," Adam said calmly, "but your sex lives are your own business. I assume you were exercising your feral instincts."

There was no condemnation in Adam's voice, in fact nothing judgemental at all and Jesse decided that he really should look at his companion. When he did his mentor appeared vaguely surprised, but that was all.

"Yes," Jesse said very carefully looking for any sign that Adam might be changing his mind as he spoke. When the man continued to look at him in a perfectly normal manner, Jesse continued. "It started in the rec area; I reacted badly to Shalimar and Brennan. Shal came after me and we had a little talk that turned into more than talking. Then Brennan came looking for Shalimar and we ... um ..."

"Seduced," Adam offered helpfully.

"Yeah," the younger man admitted slowly, "we seduced him."

"Well at least that explains the scratches on your back," Adam said in what sounded like a relieved tone, "I was afraid you and Shalimar had been fighting."

Jesse glanced futilely at his back trying to see the scratches Adam was referring to; he hadn't known there were any. It all suddenly made sense and Jesse realised how it must have looked to the older man. That Adam had been worried about him and seemed to be relieved rather than outraged by the solution Jesse, Shalimar and Brennan had found struck him as somewhat funny. Jesse was embarrassed as hell, but at least Adam seemed to be taking things calmly.

"Well having seen the three of you yesterday evening I can't say your activities have had a detrimental effect on the team," Adam said evenly, walking back to the computer, "but just be careful. Shalimar knows how to handle her feral instincts, you don't."

Jesse nodded; he was fully aware just how out of control he had been the previous day. It had occurred to him several times that the afternoon's activities

could have been disastrous and was thanking every deity he could think of that it had worked out well.

"So are we finished?" he asked lightly.

"We're finished," Adam acknowledged with a smile.

Jesse slipped off the couch and made his escape, trying to figure out how he was going to explain this one to Shalimar and Brennan.

====

Adam was staring at a readout when Emma walked into the lab just after lunch. She was beginning to think this was becoming a habit with Adam. She wandered over and glanced at the screen; it was not difficult to recognise Jesse's DNA profile; after all it was very unusual.

"Anything the matter?" Emma asked calmly, fully aware that there was something that was bothering Adam, although not to a hugely worrying extent.

"I've been re-examining the scans I did of Jesse this morning," Adam offered slowly and turned to look at her. "I thought they were a little unusual, or rather, even more unusual than I have come to expect, so I asked Shalimar to come in for her regular scan early."

"What did you find?" Emma asked as her companion paused.

Adam looked very thoughtful.

"I don't believe that Jesse's encounter with the other two was entirely accidental," the man replied evenly, "I believe he may have been following a genetic imperative."

Emma was not sure she was following her companion's reasoning; it must have shown on her face because Adam went on to explain.

"I could not work out why Praeteise included feline feral in Jesse's genetic profile," he said calmly. "All the other elements have a part to play in the gestalt, but the feline is unnecessary and actually alien to the thermal elemental, until you look at motivation. How do you get a thinking, feeling, living bomb to actively commit suicide?"

"Mind control, sub dermal governor?" Emma offered still not quite understanding the reasoning.

"Dangerous if you cannot guarantee the mind control will hold and a governor can only force an individual so far," Adam pointed out and walked towards another part of the lab.

"Brainwashing," was her next suggestion.

She followed her companion to the other display.

"In an indirect way, yes," Adam returned and typed in something at the keyboard to bring up another readout. "Feline ferals are very loyal, they adhere to the pack structure, and they are also the most emotive of the ferals. Jesse was given feline

feral DNA to gain his cooperation by making him loyal to his new pack. And what better way to do that than giving him an imperative to bond with an individual in that pack in the most intimate way."

"But Jesse escaped," Emma continued the logic, "and instead of bonding with someone in Praeteise's group Jesse chose Brennan."

"And inadvertently Shalimar as well," Adam finished.

Emma frowned slightly as the implications of conversation sunk in.

"So is Jesse permanently bonded to Brennan and Shalimar?" she asked eventually.

"That was why I asked Shalimar to come in for a scan," Adam explained quickly, "I wanted to find out if there was any effect on her from the experience. Feral's are loyal, but Jesse's feral DNA is not dominant so I suspected there would have to be something else as well. Look at this."

He pointed to the display readings; Emma saw what he was getting at immediately.

"Jesse's DNA is in Shalimar's bloodstream," she said with growing concern.

"And both Shalimar's and Brennan's are in Jesse's," Adam told her evenly. "I haven't scanned Brennan, but I'm almost sure that I will find Jesse's DNA in his bloodstream as well. The effect is not permanent; between the two scans I took of Shalimar the levels dropped, but every time they have sex they will reaffirm the bond."

"Even with unprotected sex this shouldn't happen like that," Emma said as she tried to understand, "and definitely not so quickly."

Adam nodded; this was not like a virus or a straightforward contamination and they both knew it.

"Jesse did it," Adam said calmly. "He probably has no idea exactly how or when he did it, but his phasing power is the only way it could have happened."

Emma looked at Adam and now she knew why he had been concerned.

"He's going to freak," she said shortly.

"Unfortunately I think you may be right," Adam replied with a nod. "On the good side I believe this process is designed to mostly effect Jessie and his unique genetic structure rather than his choice of bond mate, so we should be able to avoid any guilt from that angle, but I do not think this is going to please him."

That had to be the understatement of the century. Emma was in the unique position that she knew a lot of what was going on in Jesse's head and he was a lot more stressed by the whole situation than he was letting anyone else know. Too many things had happened to him in too short a time. She knew that her friend was coping with the changes in his body, but just barely, and this was not something he needed on top of that.

"Don't tell him," she said very firmly.

Adam looked at her in a rather surprised manner. It was not in the scientist's nature to hold things back from his patients when it came to their mutant abilities.

"I don't mean not ever," Emma clarified quickly, "but Jesse's closer to the edge than you know. Wait until he's more settled."

"But this effects Shalimar and Brennan as well, Emma," Adam pointed out.

"Then tell them," she insisted evenly, "but talk about it before anyone tells Jesse."

Adam glanced back at the screen thoughtfully and Emma could feel the conflict within him as the man's open nature fought with logical reasoning. Then he reached out and flicked off the display, nodding slowly as he did so.

"You're right," he said slowly. "I'll talk to Shalimar and Brennan later today; you'll have to keep Jesse occupied."

That Emma had no problem with at all.

====

Brennan had been out most of the day dealing with an incident involving an out of control invisible molecular and was surprised when Adam asked him to come in for a scan as soon as he returned. It never occurred to him it was anything to do with what he, Jesse and Shalimar had been up to the pervious day. Not having spoken to either of the other two since breakfast he had no idea Adam even knew what they'd been up to, which was why it was such a shock when Mutant X's leader mentioned it.

"What?" Brennan asked rapidly as he climbed off the scanner.

"I said, you, Shalimar and I need to have a talk about your relationship with Jesse," Adam said calmly.

"You know?" Brennan did not know quite how to react.

The other man just looked at him evenly and smiled.

"Yes," Adam replied openly, "you activities had a distinct effect on Jesse's feral mutation and he told me this morning. I've already given Shalimar several scans today and there's something we need to talk about. She should be here in a few minutes."

Brennan was not sure how to feel. Part of him wanted to be embarrassed, after all you didn't usually discus your sex life with a man who was technically your boss; then there was the part of him that was a little angry that someone else was sticking their nose into what was only the business of himself, Shalimar and Jesse; and finally there was the part of him that was slightly worried that Adam felt it necessary to do any of this. He was about to launch into a thousand questions when Shalimar walked in.

"Ah, there you are Shalimar," Adam greeted with a warm smile, "thank you for coming."

"What's up, Adam," Shalimar asked evenly, "and why is Emma keeping Jesse occupied; shouldn't he be here?"

"That's something you two have to decide," the scientist replied calmly.

Adam didn't appear to be particularly worried, but the way he was talking was making Brennan nervous. The fact that Jesse was deliberately being kept out of this did not sit right with him.

"What have you found?" he asked directly.

"This," Adam replied and flicked on the big screen.

Brennan had seen plenty of genetic scans before; it came with the territory around Sanctuary, but he did not really know what was on the screen.

"You're looking at Jesse's DNA," Adam explained before the elemental had to ask for clarification. "I found it in both of your blood streams in quantities that could not be explained by any normal method of transmission."

Well that was a revelation, but Brennan was still not sure what was going on.

"And," prompted Shalimar.

"Jesse put it there to bond himself to you both," the scientist continued, "as he also took your DNA and added it to his bloodstream. I am in no doubt that he has no idea this took place."

Brennan was even more confused.

"But why?" he asked reasonably. "I don't get it."

"Jesse was created for a task," Adam said slowly, "a very specific task with very specific parameters, but also a task that no sane individual would follow through with."

"Suicide and homicide all rolled into one," Brennan knew what the scientist was getting at; Jesse's engineering was no secret to the team.

"As with the rest of Jesse's genetic structure part of it was designed specifically to make sure he would follow through," Adam explained evenly. "He was given a genetic imperative to bond with his new pack and specifically bond intimately with someone within that pack."

"Are you trying to say that yesterday Jesse was just acting out some form of pre-programming?" Brennan didn't like where this was going.

Adam shook his head slightly.

"Technically when we seek out a partner we are all acting out pre-programming," the scientist said reasonably, "Jesse's is just a little more specific. As far as he's concerned he reacted in a perfectly natural manner. His feline feral is designed to make him loyal and then follow through with the genetic exchange. Some reptilian species are very sensitive to genetics and the fact that his DNA is in you and yours is in him will back up the feline instincts. Your bloodstreams are

reacting normally to the foreign content and cleaning it away, but it is logical to assume every time you engage in sex the exchange will occur again."

This was quite a big concept to grasp and it was taking Brennan some time to get his head around it. It wasn't as if he had really completely come to terms with the fact that he was in a relationship with two other people; that the relationship had ulterior motives was not helping.

"So Jesse is bonded to us at a fundamental level?" Shalimar asked as Brennan tried to sort out everything in his head.

"From his point of view, yes," Adam replied with a nod. "I have made significant changes to his mutations which have lessened the effect to a certain extent, but it is still there. From analysing the first scans I took, I believe that the instincts he's been following would have been compulsions had I not interfered, but he is bonded to you nevertheless and to a certain extent you to him. I doubt it will make any difference to you Shalimar; your instinctive loyalty will most likely outweigh any effect the DNA swapping will have. Brennan, on the other hand, you may find that the bonding affects your hormonal levels slightly. You may not even notice, but it is a possibility."

Brennan shared a look with Shalimar for a moment; this was all a little too much for him. Shalimar placed her hand on his shoulder in a supportive manner; she seemed to be taking this much better than he was. Of course Shalimar was ruled by instincts that Brennan could not begin to totally understand anyway, which gave her a whole different worldview.

"Jesse's not here because you know he won't like this," Shalimar was not asking a question she was making a statement.

Brennan had been so wrapped up in his own reaction that it was only as Shalimar pointed this out that he tried to look at the situation from more than his own perspective. It gave him something else to think about and brought the whole thing into proportion for him. So he was bonded to Jesse at a deeper level than he had expected, but it wasn't as if he hadn't known that the previous afternoon was not just a fling. Shaking his head he pulled his scattered thoughts together and decided to stop worrying about it all.

"He must not know," Brennan decided resolutely, "he's in no state of mind to deal with it properly. It'll be like pulling the rug out from under him and Jesse will blame himself for forcing us into this; which, for the record, he didn't."

Shalimar nodded her head firmly.

"I agree," she backed up Brennan. "Right now he needs this like he needs a hole in the head. But you knew that anyway didn't you Adam?"

"Emma was of the same opinion as you two when I showed her my analysis this afternoon," Adam admitted calmly, "and she convinced me of her point of view. I don't normally advocate withholding information, but in this instance I believe that we should at least wait."

It occurred to Brennan that his whole outlook on life had taken a major side road in the last day and a half, but, as Shalimar decided to perch next to him on the couch and drape her arm over his shoulders, he was not of a mind to resent it.

This was strange, but then his whole life was strange; how many people could say that they could throw lightening bolts from their hands.

"Then we go on as normal," he said evenly, "and take it as it comes."

"I'll be keeping an eye on you," Adam replied in a very fatherly manner, "but I don't foresee any side effects other than the obvious."

====

It took almost another week and a lot of digging, but eventually things began to make sense and the information Mutant X needed started to form a pattern. The computer watchdogs began to show up interesting anomalies and an old report of a sighting of Maria Montoban gave them a lead. Piecing together vague references and rumours along with shipping records and supplies that appeared to go nowhere, they tracked down what had to be the headquarters of the group who had taken Jesse.

Once they had identified the facility, Adam's long reach and high up contacts soon came back with plans of the place. The blue prints were not new and there was information that the facility had been refurbished recently, but it was enough information to make a reasonable facsimile. Mutant X had been running holographic scenarios for two days before Adam decided they were ready.

Jesse placed his hands on the metal grill over the air duct and, taking a deep breath, phased it into intangibility. The other three climbed past him into the building and Jesse followed quickly. Brennan had already fried the alarm on the ducting and they moved quickly without fear of immediate discovery. There was a short piece of ducting they all had to crawl along and Jesse was just behind Emma. He watched his friend move over the way down and gently lower herself into the hole, before giving her a couple of seconds and following. He dropped out quietly into a dimly lit corridor where the other three were already standing.

"Okay," Brennan said in little more than a whisper, "Everyone know what they're supposed to do?"

Jesse nodded as did Emma and Shalimar. From their intel they knew that most of the new mutants in the facility were there against their will, but that Praeteise was using something similar to a sub-dermal governor on them all. One of their big problems is they didn't really know what the collars did. That was Emma and Jesse's part of the operation; to find the prisoners, ascertain what the collars did and decide how to proceed from there. If they could they would rescue the others and be done with it.

Meanwhile Shalimar and Brennan were on a sabotage mission. It was their job to destroy Praeteise's work and make sure the man couldn't continue what he was doing, at least for now. Shutting down the whole program was unlikely to work, not with the short notice they were working with, but they hoped to destroy it for now. Even black ops needed funding and with luck further work would turn out to be prohibitively expensive if they did the job properly.

Shalimar put her hand out and Jesse reached out without thinking to lay his hand over hers. Brennan did the same and Emma placed her fingers delicately on top of all of them.

"Stay safe," was all Shalimar said.

"Always," Jesse replied.

He knew there was a good chance Shalimar and Brennan would run into Praeteise, it was one of the reasons he was on the other part of the mission and he had to sit on his fear for them. The doctor had become a figure of nightmare for him and, even in the light of day, he could not think rationally about the man. He prayed this would go as simply as most of their simulations; if something happened to any of his friends he had no idea what he would do.

What looked like barracks was to the left and the control room was right so, with a quick nod, Jesse turned, ready to head off to his and Emma's target. He didn't want to give himself time for the fear to take hold. He was stopped by a hand grabbing his arm and then he was turned and Shalimar planted a furious kiss right on his lips.

"See you soon," she said and then she was off in the other direction, dragging Brennan with her.

For a moment Jesse just stood there and then he turned to Emma.

"Come on," he said and headed towards the stairs he knew would take them down a level.

====

The door slid back and Jesse slipped through followed by Emma. Jesse was watching out behind them and it was only as Emma tapped him on the shoulder that he actually looked into the room. It was a bunkroom and there were now five startled appearing people staring at them from where they were sitting or lying on the regulation looking beds. Each one wore a collar around their necks. Jesse's eyes fixed on one woman and his mind's eye filled with a memory.

"I'm sorry," the woman said quietly bending over Jesse and pushing the hair off of his face, "I don't mean to cause you pain. I have no choice; if I don't do as they say I will end up just like you."

With a blink Jesse snapped back to reality and he knew who he was looking at. She barely resembled the picture from the computer that they had been using to search for her; the slightly plump, smiling face from the photograph had been replaced by a thin, dejected visage of a woman who had lost hope.

"Maria?" Jesse asked quietly.

"Delta?" the woman sounded less sure of her recognition than Jesse was of his.

"It's Jesse actually," Emma provided the information as Jesse and Maria just stared at each other, "and I'm Emma, we're here to get you out."

The woman looked dubious, but two of the other people in the room stood up at the news.

"You haven't neutralised the restraining collars," she said pointedly. "If we leave this room every alarm in the building will go off and then at least one of us will be dead."

"We're working on it," Jesse said pointedly, shaking himself out of the slight disassociation he was feeling.

It was difficult to know whether to feel sympathy for the woman or to be angry with her, after all she had caused him a great deal of agony.

"How do they work?" Emma asked evenly as Jesse tried not to glare at Maria.

"There's a central computer in the main lab," the other mutant provided as if it meant nothing to her, "it controls the collars. Dr Praeteise has a remote he can use to set off certain functions."

"What are the effects and can you resist them?" Emma continued to question the woman as Jesse glanced around the other faces in the room.

There was a degree of hopelessness in each expression and Jesse felt a sudden responsibility to these people he did not know.

"Stun or kill work instantly," Maria said as if she was so used to providing answers on demand that she just did it, "the other effects are more subtle. He's connected to our nervous systems; he can make us see and hear things. We don't know what's real to resist."

Jesse did not like the tone in her voice; it was as if she had no way out and would not even try to find one. He found that he wanted to know what could cause that.

"How long have you been here?" he asked quietly.

"Nearly a year," Maria told him openly. "The government came to my house and told me I could help the one man who helped me survive puberty, so I came."

"What happened?" Jesse could not stop himself asking.

"He was half dead," the woman continued evenly. "Genomex had placed him in stasis after the incident; it hadn't been an accident if you know what I mean; something to do with his morals getting in the way of Genomex. The people running this operation had taken him out of stasis and rebuilt some of his equipment; they used me to bring him back from the edge. Only I didn't bring back the man I knew, I brought back a monster: he's insane. The next thing I know I'm in one of these things," she indicated the collar, "and I'm part of a brave new weapons program."

"How many before me?" Jesse asked as the question was drawn from him.

"He started with a feral," Maria said looking him straight in the eye, "then an elemental, then another molecular and then you. We've been working our way through the Greek alphabet. The others all died."

Her words caused the smouldering anger that Jesse was carrying around with him to flare up and he felt his feral leap to the surface. He looked away from Maria blinking away the golden eyes he knew would be showing; now was not the time or place to lose his temper. Three other lives wiped out and all because the government wanted a weapon; it was hideous.

"We're going to stop this," Jesse said evenly and looked to Emma. "Ready?"

Emma nodded and Jesse went through the blueprint of the complex in his head.

"Is the main lab one floor down three doors after the stairwell?" he asked Maria pointedly.

The woman just nodded; she seemed surprised by his attitude.

"We'll be back," Emma said and Jesse turned to the door.

With a sign from his companion, Jesse opened the door and peered into the corridor. It was time to show the government that messing with new mutants was a very bad idea.

End of Chapter 6

Chapter 7 Confrontation

Something told Shalimar that all was not right. It wasn't that she heard anything or saw anything or even smelt anything, it was just an instinct. She looked at Brennan as he moved down the other side of the corridor and she just knew that they were in danger.

"Back up," she hissed quietly.

Brennan stopped where he was ahead of her and turned with a questioning look. Shalimar shook her head at him and beckoned him back; she had no explanation yet, but she was sure. Her companion looked confused, but he did not argue and he began to make his way back to her. As Shalimar turned around herself, her instincts were proved more right than she could have known.

Two men appeared from the door a few metres behind then and the cat in Shalimar hissed. She had no doubt that both men were ferals and they were canine ferals to boot. Glancing back at Brennan she saw him stand up straight and bring his hands together ready to attack. Shalimar's feline nature was telling her to attack as well, but she was not about to get in Brennan's way and she flattened herself against the wall at the two opponents approached. Her elemental partner drew his hands apart and let the electricity flow between them looking up at the enemy as he did so.

It still felt wrong, but Shalimar could not put her finger on what. They had been discovered and yet the other ferals did not seem to be surprised or afraid of Brennan's show of force. It was as the elemental raised his hands to let free a tesla coil that the sprinklers cut in.

"No!" Shalimar yelled, but it was too late; Brennan's powers turned on him as the water soaked him almost instantly; he fell to the floor writhing as the electricity ran across his body.

This was a trap; something must have given them away. Shalimar had no time to think about it now, however; as soon as Brennan collapsed the two ferals ran for her. Leaping up and over then she landed on the now wet floor behind them; neither man appeared to be as fast as her, but they were both bigger. Taking advantage of their slightly slower reflexes Shalimar kicked one of them in the back and sent him sprawling, bouncing back onto her feet in time to block an attack from the other feral.

They exchanged another few blows until she made it through his guard and side swiped him in the stomach. The man doubled over and she pushed him backwards, but turned to her other opponent barely in time to block a strike coming straight for her head. These ferals were strong, much stronger than the average new mutant with the same powers and Shalimar knew she was in trouble. Her own feral powers were highly evolved, but she was not a match for two opponents who were this strong unless luck was on her side.

Kicking at the man in front of her, she tried to put some space between herself and both attackers. Running at the wall she leapt at it and then pushed herself over backwards to land further up the corridor closer to Brennan. The elemental was lying where he had fallen, senseless, but at least still breathing. Having checked that he was alive, Shalimar focused solely on her enemies.

They came at her at the same time again and she had to dodge under one's reach while trying to avoid a kick from the other. The pincer action was not easy to avoid and the kick landed as a glancing blow on her right leg. She replied with a punch that narrowly missed the other feral's groin.

The fight continued as the three exchanged blows and it was taking all of Shalimar's skills to avoid being beaten to a pulp. Her reflexes may have been faster, but with two against one they were wearing her down. Finally as she pivoted away from one of them the other landed a stunning blow on her sternum which sent her reeling backwards towards the man she had been trying to avoid. The canine feral literally grabbed her bodily and lifting her in the air threw her at the opposite corridor wall.

Disorientated from the blow Shalimar could not stop herself and she collided with the brickwork hard her right arm taking most of the force. When she landed on the floor she was stunned and her arm was numb. The two ferals pounced on her mercilessly and as one pinned her down the other dragged her head up by the hair. Before she could do anything about it one of them fastened a collar around her neck.

That was when the pair backed away and she was left huddled on the floor. Shalimar looked up at them confused and hissed, ready for round two, but as she raised herself off the floor what felt like one of Brennan's bolts emitted from the collar and the world went away.

====

The idea of going to the lab scared the hell out of Jesse, but the control centre was in the lab and so he had little choice. If they were going to stop Praeteise then turning loose his captive new mutants would be a very good start. Blowing the hell out of the facility would be a good second step, but that was not an option while there were people inside.

Jesse and Emma moved down the corridor slowly, on the alert for anything, but they were unchallenged. When they reached the door, the frosted glass window showed a dark room with just a few blinking lights to indicate where the computer bank was on the other side. Trying to control his almost paralysing fear, Jesse placed his hands on the wall next to the door and phased it. As he followed Emma through all hell broke loose.

"Trap," was as far as Emma got before a stream of some sort of gas hit her in face; she folded like a house of cards.

Jesse was still holding his breath and he dived away from the noxious cloud as the lights suddenly came up. Rolling back to his feet he took in a sight that almost caused him to panic. In the centre of the room was Praeteise with his arms folded, looking smug; to Jesse's left was a woman in a collar that he half recognised; to the other side of the room were two other collared mutants one holding a damp Brennan and one holding Shalimar, whose left arm appeared to be hanging limply. The sight of both his friends wearing the same collars as the others sent cold fear up Jesse's spine.

He barely had time to react, however, as the female mutant to his left caught his gaze. As if someone had snapped the connection between his mind and his body he couldn't move and when he reached for his powers there was nothing there.

Now he remembered the woman; she had been in the club the night he was taken; she was the one who had stolen his soul.

"Isn't this nice," Praeteise said as Jesse tried desperately to make his body work, "all back together again and three new recruits as well. Imagine my amazement when the internal sensors alerted me to four mutant intruders, and then when I found out one of them was you, Delta I was delighted. Every scan we did of the test centre convinced us you were dead, I had no idea you were alive until you came back to me."

The man walked towards him and out of the corner of his eye Jesse could see he was carrying another collar. This could not be happening; they could not loose like this. In complete desperation Jesse mentally screamed his need for help at the prone Emma; he was trapped and she was his only hope. Unable to see her, all he could do was pray that she was sentient enough to do something, anything that might give them a chance.

"Your two friends were quite easy to trap once I had identified them," the scientist continued conversationally. "It will be good to have a powerful elemental in our arsenal; the only one we had was subject Beta and she died before clone maturity. You were almost too fast for us, Delta, but we managed to put together this little reception. If you were wondering why your psionic friend failed to warn you of the danger it's simple really; Jaclyn here, among her other talents can create interference fields."

The man was only the other side of a lab bench now and Jesse was petrified. How could this be happening? Jesse had almost given up hope when something bright streaked past his eyes and hit Jaclyn. The woman went down and suddenly he had his body back. He glanced round to see Emma slumping back to the ground and then he turned to Praeteise. Fear slowly turned to anger. The man looked startled by the incident, but as Jesse jumped onto the bench the scientist moved rapidly back to where he had been standing when Jesse had first entered the room. Without hesitation Jesse went for him, leaping off the other side of the lab bench, but as he came close Praeteise held up a small black key fob type device he had picked up off the other bench.

"Come one step closer and every new mutant in this building dies," he said firmly and brought Jesse to a halt. "The collars are rigged to kill if failsafe is initiated; the final solution if you will."

The feelings of rage were hard to control and Jesse could barely hold himself still. The scientist's casual tone was so patronising and he appeared to have no concept of what he was saying.

"You are my first working prototype, Delta," Praeteise said with a total absence of human feeling in his eyes, "I need you back. Let's compromise; I'm willing to let your friends go if you'll just put on the restraining collar. If you resist I'll have to kill them."

To illustrate his point he waved the remote control in his hand and nodded at one of his minions. The man twisted Shalimar's damaged arm. All that he received for his trouble was a hiss of protest from the subdued feral.

"Your genetic structure is incredible," the scientist did not appear to realise that his words were not convincing Jesse to cooperate. "You survived the procedures

and you even used your gestalt abilities once and lived. Your DNA is more important to me than you could possibly know."

Everything that he had been going through, every agony to every minor inconvenience coalesced in hatred so pure it took Jesse's breath away. This man had taken away his life and twisted his genes beyond recognition and now he dared to try and hurt his friends and lovers. This scientist had tried to play god and it had killed people. Feral instinct combined with complete fury and rationality left his mind. Bargaining was not an option and Jesse chose action.

The growl started low in his chest and rumbled up through his throat, which should have warned Praeteise what was coming, but the scientist appeared to still believe he had the upper hand. Swiping away the collar and the control from the man's hands in one swift move, Jesse let instinct take over and the growl turned into a hiss as he opened his mouth and spat venom in the scientist's face. Praeteise fell back with a cry and his hands went to his eyes.

"I ... will ... never ... submit," Jesse was barely capable of speech he was so angry.

This man had made him a murderer. This parody of a human being had taken everything away from him and only Adam had given it back.

"Kill it," Praeteise cried and it seemed the scientist had finally realised how dangerous his creation was.

Guns rattled and shots began to fly, but Jesse simply stood there and the bullets sheered away from his body. He was running on a completely different level now and his telekinetic ability kicked in before his imperviousness as instinct took the easiest path.

"This ... stops," he screamed at the world in general and lifted his arms above his head.

There was nothing Jesse cared about more now than preventing this man hurting anyone else. His friends, the nameless new mutants who Praeteise would destroy if allowed to continue; Jesse would not allow this to happen. Here in this place he remembered; he knew the feeling of the power contained in his cells; the sensation of mutations working in harmony and joining together in destructive glory. He reached for that feeling again and he found it, but this time he was in control. This time there would be only one death and it would stop a scientist playing god with forces he did not understand ever again.

Elemental joined with psionic which joined with molecular and fuelled by feral loyalty and fury they burst out of him at his enemy. Mutant powers fed off each other and created something that no human being would have believed possible. Jesse could feel his cells resonating with energy and he knew exactly what he wanted to do with it. A sphere of fire erupted from his body and consumed everything it touched. The bench beside him burst into flames with a level of thermal power he had never shown back at Sanctuary. Guided by telekinetic precision the fire moved outwards and claimed more of the lab.

Jesse knew his eyes would be glowing bright yellow and, when he looked into Praeteise face, he saw a man who suddenly realised what he had created. This was his enemy; the man who must be stopped and the scientist deserved no mercy. He had created an angel of death and he was going to pay for it with his

life. The man barely had time to scream as the mutant fire touched him and simply vaporised his flesh.

"Jesse, no!" Shalimar screamed from where she was held and struggled with her captor.

Her words made it into his mind and the fear he heard there cut to his heart, but Jesse also knew it was too late. There was no way to stop this now, all he could do was control it. The forces inside him had been set free and there was no way to cage them now. He had to make sure this could never happen to anyone else; that no one could ever make something as dangerous as him ever again. The fire moved on, melting metal, burning wood, shattering glass and phasing straight through every human being in the room. Jesse was destroying every part of the lab; no one would be able to go on this time. His awareness reached the edge of the room, but he didn't stop; he had to remove every trace of Praeteise's work in the building; every record, every computer and every Petri dish. Jesse could no longer see the lab; all his senses were turned inwards and only his telekinetic spatial awareness combined with reptilian magnetic sensitivity guided his power onwards.

Everywhere in the complex hardware was destroyed even as people looked on in horror, but were untouched by the destruction. This time a mind controlled the power; this time conscious thought prevented death; human beings were spared, but that was all, even the collars on every new mutant split and fell to the ground. Then Jesse's awareness found something it had not expected; it found kindred. Like recognised like, but the other mind was stunted, confused, and unformed. Jesse wanted to know more, but his time was almost spent. The power coursing through his body hurt now and he knew it was over; the toll on his cells was too much and the gestalt was fading. His task was done; everything within his reach was destroyed and his awareness returned to the lab as the fire went out as suddenly as it had begun.

As vision returned, he found himself lying on his back looking up at a distraught Shalimar. Brennan was just behind her holding a groggy Emma on her feet.

"Jesse, hold on," Shalimar said urgently, "we'll get you back to Sanctuary."

The pain burning through every cell seemed to fade as Jesse looked into his lover's eyes and he didn't think there was time for them to take him home. At this point he didn't really care anymore; he had done what needed to be done and there was only one thing left before he could let go.

"Another," he said quietly with the last of his strength, "another clone."

Even as the words slipped out his vision began to fade. Jesse was so tired now and cold, all he wanted to do was sleep. With a small sigh and a regret that he could not tell the others he loved them one more time, he let the darkness take him and peaceful blackness took over his mind.

====

Jesse opened his eyes and found that he was incredibly surprised; he was still breathing. His reawakening was remarkably similar to his passing out as he looked up and found Shalimar looking down at him, only this time he was not lying on a cold floor he was lying on a padded examination couch and Shalimar did not look distraught she looked determined.

"If you ever do anything so stupid ever again," she said pointedly, the moment he focused on her face, "I will kill you myself; slowly. Do you understand?"

Jesse just blinked at her for a moment and finally nodded.

"Good," she said and then kissed him firmly on the lips.

Then the fact that his whole body ached made it into Jesse's head. He was suddenly of the opinion that if he ever tried that again death, even at the hands of Shalimar, might be the more comfortable option.

"How long?" Jesse asked, trying to distract himself from the discomfort.

"You've been asleep three days," Shalimar supplied helpfully. "Adam pulled off a miracle bringing you back, again."

Jesse could hear the very strong reprimand in her tone.

"And we don't want him to have to do that anymore," Brennan's voice joined the conversation and it appeared that everyone was going to make sure Jesse understood he was never to do anything like his gestalt trick ever again.

"I get it," he promised quietly, "no suicidal explosions, ever."

"Just so we're clear," Brennan said with his most stern expression that cracked into a smile before he could hold it more than a couple of seconds. "We do not want to lose you."

Jesse put his hand on his heart.

"Scouts honour," he promised faithfully.

Only as Shalimar moved away slightly did Jesse notice that he was not the only one in the wars and he remembered she had appeared injured in the lab. Shalimar's arm was strapped up and Jesse was pretty sure she was supposed to be using the sling that was hanging uselessly from her neck.

"Is everyone else okay?" he asked quickly.

"We're all fine," Shalimar promised faithfully. "My bandages are coming off tomorrow, Brennan didn't do too much damage when he fried himself and the gas used on Emma wasn't very long lasting. You're the only one who managed to do anything serious."

She gave him a glare to make sure her point was made and he gave her a repentant look in return. It was then that Emma walked into the room and trailing slightly behind her, holding her hand, was a small blond boy of about seven years old in appearance. Jesse's heart jumped as he found himself looking at a carbon copy of him as a child.

"Hi, Jesse," Emma greeted with a smile, "I'd like you to meet Martin."

The boy looked at him with solemn blue eyes and it was the most peculiar experience.

"You were a cute kid," Brennan observed irreverently, "shame you grew up."

Jesse just gave him a dirty look and Emma led the boy further into the room.

"We found Martin in a stasis pod a level down from the lab," the telepath explained without having to be asked. "They were using some sort of brain inhibitor on him, we think so another consciousness could be transferred in," she did not mention that the consciousness had probably been intended to be Jesse's, "but Adam removed it. We haven't managed to coax him to speak yet, but he appears to have some form of genetic memory about most other things."

With a concerted effort, Jesse propped himself up on one arm to give himself a better view of the boy.

"Hi," he greeted slowly, feeling somehow close to the youngster, but also very strange about the whole situation.

At the greeting the boy smiled.

"He's a cheerful little guy," Shalimar said lightly, "so he couldn't have got everything from you."

It was obviously get Jesse back for making them worry time and all in all he decided he deserved it, but he gave Shalimar a similar dirty look to the one he had given Brennan just to keep up appearances. It would not do to let either of them get away with their quips completely; Jesse had no wish to end up the butt of jokes from here to eternity.

He would have tried to find a comeback, but he was too tired. He found that he couldn't even hold himself up on one arm for long and he had to lie back down.

"You're tired," Shalimar observed in an over protective, slightly anxious way.

It was not difficult to tell that she had been very shaken up by the whole experience; Shalimar did not take well to members of her pack being in danger.

"We should let you get some more sleep," she decided firmly and usually when Shalimar used that tone of voice no one argued with her.

This time, however, Jesse risked it; he was tired, but he didn't think he could sleep again just yet and he was enjoying the company.

"Shal," he said quietly, "I am not going to break and I've been asleep for three days."

Shalimar looked like she was going to argue the point, but Brennan put his hand on her arm.

"Jesse do you promise to just fall asleep if you feel like it?" his male lover asked in as serious a tone as he could manage.

"Trust me," Jesse said with a half-smile, "an earthquake wouldn't stop me."

He turned his wide blue eyes onto Shalimar knowing that she would never be able to resist in her current emotional state.

"Come on," he said cajolingly, "someone has to fill me on what I've missed ... again."

Shalimar put her hands on her hips and her expression said that she knew that she was being manipulated, but she finally smiled.

"Don't think those baby blues will work a second time," she warned lightly. "And don't get used to sleeping through the clean up; next mission I'm going to be the one cosy and warm as the rest of you do all the hard work."

Jesse favoured her with a grin.

"So what did I miss?" he asked, relaxing back onto the couch.

"Well," Brennan provided happily, "Praeteise had fifteen new mutants in his employ, but all of them were very glad to regain their freedom. Those collars are nasty; they play with your mind; I'll take a sub dermal governor anytime."

"We put any who wanted to go into the underground," Emma took up the story, "and helped the others to go home. Praeteise had interfered with some of their mutations, but Adam will stay in contact with them to make sure they're okay."

The news did not surprise Jesse, he would have expected no less of the leader of Mutant X; Adam always seemed to take responsibility for other's mistakes as well as his own.

"And the people running the facility?" the young mutant asked.

"Running scared," Shalimar told him firmly, "it seems that their operation was very black; so black in fact that none of the regular military will admit to knowing anything about it. Since you destroyed everything there are no records to trace back to the money, but it means they can't rebuild either."

The feral patted Jesse on the arm to let him know that she approved of his actions if not the method.

"Your explosion was very impressive," Brennan said with a grin, "every soldier in the place just surrendered when we tried to leave and the scientists were so busy thinking up their excuses that cleaning them out was easy. Adam's friends in the government sent some people to help out once we'd done all the hard work."

"Sounds like sleeping was the best option," Jesse commented and found himself yawning; he recognised the feeling.

He had suffered from an inability to keep awake for extended periods of time last time he had woken up, but Jesse fought off the desire to close his eyes. It would be impossible to fight the desire eventually and was an indication that his genetic structure had fluxed, but he did not want to sleep yet. There was a large stubborn streak in Jesse's nature and he wanted to talk.

"What about Maria?" he asked and stifled another yawn.

"Back home with her SO," Emma replied with a smile. "I think Adam has plans for her if she's willing. Her abilities are remarkable; his words not mine."

"Another recruit for the cause," Jesse said lightly. "Did anyone warn her about our glorious leader?"

"Seemed pointless," Shalimar said cheerfully, "there is no stopping the force that is Adam."

Jesse found himself laughing around another yawn and this time when he blinked he found it harder to open his eyes again. It was a little frustrating, but even Jesse's stubborn streak knew futility when it saw it. He saw a knowing smile playing on Shalimar's face.

"I'm not asleep yet," he protested with another heavy lidded blink.

"Yes you are," Shalimar said quietly, "you're just imagining being awake."

Jesse would have objected again, but it was far too much effort. He made a mental note to get the others back for being so smug and finally let his eyes close. He felt the brush of lips against his forehead and then he drifted back into sleep.

====

The after effects of the gestalt this time were not as long lasting as they had been the previous time. Adam had told Jesse that this was because his genetic structure was more stable when the event occurred, but that didn't stop it being uncomfortable. He was confined to the lab as before and he tired easily, but there had been hints that he would be set free shortly. When Adam walked in carrying a sheaf of paper, Jesse hoped his time had come.

"Your tests are looking positive," the scientist said evenly, "I'd like you to stay here today, but I don't see why you can't go in the morning."

"Great," Jesse said sitting up from where he was leaning back on the examination couch.

"But," Jesse could have guessed there was a 'but' coming, "we need to have a talk first."

So far everyone else had given him the don't-ever-do-anything-so-stupid speech at least twice; he had been waiting for the same thing from Adam.

"I promise I won't do it again," Jesse said trying to pre-empt the whole thing, but the look on Adam's face told him he wasn't going to get away that easily.

"Good," the scientist said ignoring the hint, "because next time it may be worse than the first time."

That gained Jesse's attention; any mention of the incident at the test facility always gained his attention.

"I ran an analysis of both scenes," the older man explained calmly, "and then I ran some scenarios in the computer. If you gestalt again you may kill more than yourself. Your gestalt power increased significantly from the first incident to the second and although you had more control, if the same increase occurs again, you will lose it and in all likelihood you will go up like a small nuclear bomb."

That sounded like an exaggeration, but looking at his companion Jesse did not think Adam was embellishing the truth. It was difficult to imagine.

"I don't understand," he admitted.

"I've told you that gestalts were unstable," Adam explained. "I thought I had eliminated the possibility that you could ever use yours again. Your powers react together in the gestalt and after a certain point they will turn on you. The thing about your particular set of powers is that the probability is when you lose control completely your molecular mutation combined with your telekinetic mutation will go subatomic."

Jesse just stared at Adam for a moment; it sounded farfetched.

"Subatomic," he said slowly, trying to get his head round the idea, "but then I could..."

Jesse did not finish the sentence as he realised what his companion was implying.

"Split the atom," Adam completed it for him. "Your molecular mutation allows you to control the forces between atoms, your telekinetic power affects forces, if your gestalt goes out of control your abilities could increase to the point where you could affect the bonds between subatomic particles. You could take out half a city in a nuclear explosion."

The idea was hideous and Jesse just sat there, staring at the floor, letting it sink in. Mutant powers could be destructive on the small scale, but this was huge; even when he had had the virus that sent his powers out of control this had never been an option.

"Jesse," Adam said firmly, "this is only a possibility and one which can never happen if you do not use the gestalt ability. I'm telling you this because I want you to understand that there is no situation that could ever be worth the risk."

Jesse gave his companion a nod although he was still reeling from the idea and did not look up at the older man.

"I know you too well, Jesse," his friend said in a much warmer tone, "if you thought you could save the others by using your gestalt even though it would kill you, you'd do it. I've tried to make it impossible for you, but I can't, so I need you to realise exactly what you'd be doing."

Now Jesse looked up. Adam's eyes were serious, but his expression was very supportive.

"I understand," Jesse said steadily.

"Good," the other man said and now he smiled, "I'm glad we have that out of the way. The other thing I wanted to talk to you about is Martin."

It was such a turn around that Jesse's mind had to do a back flip to catch up. He blinked and shook himself out of the apocalyptic gloom that had descended on him.

"He's a sweet kid," Jesse acknowledged.

"And adapting rapidly," Adam told the younger man cheerfully. "I must admit to being surprised by his remarkable progress; technically he should be at the developmental stage of an infant, but he exhibits the prowess of a child of his physical size. I can only reason that Praeteise's technique of using a new mutant to speed Martin's growth caused the partial genetic memory."

A vague memory of the growth process tried to make it into Jesse's mind, but he squashed it with ruthless force; now was not the time for anything like that.

"Emma says he's genetically me," the blond mutant said quickly, "I mean, me as I was before they re-engineered me, not me now."

Adam nodded.

"Yes," he replied openly, "although his powers are far more developed than yours would have been at the same physical age; which is why I wanted to talk to you about him. Martin has some control, but he is nowhere near as proficient as you and until he has more command of his mutation I do not believe it is safe to place him with a family. I would like you to help him; after all you understand your molecular mutation better than anyone else."

The request caused two emotions in Jesse; one was a great feeling of warmth and pride that Adam thought he was capable of doing this; and the other was a vague fear at the responsibility. He chose to go with the former.

"No problem," he said with a half-smile.

"That's settled then," Adam said with pleasure, "you can start tomorrow. I wouldn't suggest you try and use your own powers for another couple of days, but that shouldn't provide too much of an obstacle with helping Martin."

At the show of faith and the finality in the statement the fear came back; self-doubt was not a good emotion for a new mutant so Jesse stamped on it.

"Adam," he said half to distract himself and half because he wanted to know, "why doesn't he talk?"

The other man had been turning away, but he paused at the question.

"I don't know," the scientist admitted honestly, "he seems to exhibit most other motor skills and he understands what the rest of us are saying. Maybe he just doesn't have anything to say."

It was not exactly the scientific answer that Jesse had been hoping for, but it appeared to be the only theory Adam was going to impart.

"Get some more rest, Jesse," Adam said calmly, walking back towards the door, "you're going to need it."

Of that Jesse had no doubt.

End of Chapter 7

Chapter 8 Living On

Martin was a nice child and from the times he had visited the lab with Emma he seemed to like Jesse, but that didn't stop Jesse from feeling nervous. The boy spent most of his time with Emma and Jesse felt vaguely like an interloper when he walked up to where the pair was sitting cross legged on the floor after Adam set him loose from his confinement.

"Hi Jess," Emma greeted brightly, "Martin and I were just practicing our focusing. Would you care to join us?"

"Only if you promise not to show me up," Jesse replied, hiding his anxiety behind humour.

"Oh I think we can arrange that," Emma replied as if she had no idea what was really going through Jesse's head.

Emma always tried to keep her powers to herself, but strong emotion usually made it through to her somehow and Jesse had no doubt he was emoting now. Doing his best to calm himself, the blond mutant took up position the opposite side of Martin to Emma and sat down.

"We were working on breath control," his friend explained calmly and Jesse followed her lead.

They spent a good half hour practicing various focussing techniques before Emma turned around and smiled at them brightly.

"Well there are things I've been neglecting," she said cheerfully, "so I'll leave you boys together. If you need me I'll be in my room."

And with that she was gone before Jesse had any time to adjust to the idea. It didn't really help that the short kata they had just been doing had left him tired. He looked at Martin and the boy gazed back with identical blue eyes: Jesse wasn't quite sure what to do.

"Guess we get to do what we want," he said after a few seconds. "Had enough of the focusing?"

The boy smiled at him and nodded.

"Hungry?" Jesse asked, knowing that he always seemed to be peckish these days and suspecting that Martin would be too.

That gained him an even bigger smile and a very enthusiastic nod.

"Good," he said in a conspiratorial whisper, "so am I. Let's find food."

It didn't take long to track down some bread and an obscene number of fillings, after which Jesse and Martin bonded while making a mess. The boy did not speak, but he communicated so well on other levels that Jesse didn't really feel as if he was talking to himself the entire time. Whatever genetic memory Martin had, it seemed to include some of Jesse's mannerisms as he recognised a lot of himself in the child.

Once they had made their creations, they tidied and then retired to the upstairs table to eat. Jesse was amazed that such a small frame could put away so much food as Martin then proceeded to demolish his sandwich about twice as fast he did. Of course the fact that Jesse was talking and the boy was not probably had something to do with it as well.

"So, Adam says you're having a little problem controlling your powers," Jesse said eventually as Martin finally took a breather.

The boy looked at him a little unsure and then gave a small shrug.

"Let me guess," he said quietly and leant towards the child, "you try to phase and it makes you feel like you're going to vanish forever and then you get scared and forget what you're supposed to be doing and bits phase back in even though you don't want them to?"

Martin's eyes grew wide with surprise and he nodded slowly.

"Used to happen to me all the time," Jesse said honestly with a smile. "Now all the focusing stuff Emma's being showing you is great, and you do have to concentrate, but I have a secret."

His companion looked intrigued.

"You know that tight feeling you get just as you phase out?" he continued.

Martin frowned for a second as if thinking about it and then slowly gave the affirmative.

"You have to hold on to it," Jesse explained calmly. "When you feel it, you need to grab it, and then when you phase out it helps stop the feeling that you're turning into nothing."

Martin thought about this for a few moments and then he slowly smiled. Looking at Jesse he grinned, and then he phased. Jesse was impressed: the boy held it for a good few seconds before his arm phased back in, quickly followed by the rest of him.

"Not bad," Jesse told him supportively, "you'll be phasing through walls before you know it."

Martin beamed at him.

====

Emma walked back into the main part of Sanctuary not sure what she would find and she didn't quite expect the sight which greeted her. Martin was sitting on the floor in the rec. area holding an apple in front of him. He had an expression of supreme concentration on his face and he was phasing his hand and the apple in and out at regular intervals. Jesse was sprawled in the chair behind the boy completely out for the count.

As Emma walked towards them, Martin looked up and smiled: he put his finger to his lips and glanced back at Jesse. Emma couldn't help smiling: it was just too cute.

"Hi, Martin," she said in no more than a whisper, "have you had a good afternoon?"

The boy nodded solemnly and held out the apple, phasing it as he did so. He kept it phased for at least ten seconds and then let it return: Emma was impressed.

"That's very good," she praised honestly; the previous day Martin had not even been able to hold a phase for more than a second with any degree of control.

"Jesse taught me," Martin said frankly and went back to practicing.

Emma just stood there for a moment with her mouth open: okay so she definitely hadn't expected that.

=====

Jesse watched Martin as he massed himself out and walked calmly across the room. Moving and phasing or massing was actually a lot more difficult than it may have appeared and Jesse was pleased when Martin made it over a metre. Over the past two and a half weeks the boy had made very good progress and was more than what Jesse would define as proficient. Martin still didn't talk much, but he had proved on a couple of occasions that he was quite capable of doing so if he wished.

From the nervous start he had made, Jesse had progressed to enjoying his role as mentor enormously. The additional powers he had gained sometimes made him feel as if he had shifted back to square one, but being able to teach someone else all he knew about his molecular mutation had given him a real ego boost. These days Jesse and Martin spent a good percentage of the day together and Jesse could not help thinking of the boy as a younger sibling.

"Jesse," Adam said walking into the room, "may I have a few moments of your time please?"

Jesse turned and smiled.

"Sure, Adam," he said lightly. "Martin, see if you can work on phasing the table. I know it's big but you almost managed it last time and I'm sure you can do it."

The child nodded with a confident smile and then Jesse gave his attention to Adam. The two men stepped outside the room, but Jesse kept one eye on Martin through the open door. The kid was trying very hard to phase the table and a couple of times he almost had it.

"I wanted to tell you first," Adam said when Jesse glanced at him, "I believe I have found a home for Martin."

The news caused Jesse to focus solely on his mentor and his first instinct was to tell his companion that there was no way he was letting Martin go. Feral and human emotions joined to insist that the boy was part of the Mutant X family now and they would not let him leave. However, common sense also told him that this was the only good and fair thing for the youngster.

Taking a deep breath Jesse tried to suppress his outrage at the suggestion and listen to the rational voice in his head instead: it was not the easiest thing to do.

"I see," he said slowly giving himself time to come to terms with the news.

"I'm sorry, Jesse," Adam said sympathetically, "but he needs a home that may not come under attack at any second."

Jesse nodded and tried to clear his head.

"It's alright, Adam," he said slowly, "I've always known this was coming: it's just difficult to deal with now it's here. I'm sort of used to the way things are now."

Adam smiled supportively: the older man seemed to understand.

"Do you mind if I break the news to him?" Jesse asked before his companion could speak.

"That was what I was going to suggest," the scientist admitted, "I think he will take it better from you. They're a good family, not too far away and they've taken younger mutants before. He'll be with good people."

Jesse glanced back at where Martin was still trying hard to phase the table: part of him felt as if he was losing his own child. The fact that the boy would be much safer and more secure was a faint comfort against that.

"How long?" he asked eventually.

"Just under a week," Adam replied calmly.

With a nod Jesse turned to walk back in to the room.

"I'll tell him this evening," he said quietly.

Putting on his best smile Jesse went back to Martin, trying to figure out how he would deal with this.

====

"Hey, squirt," Jesse greeted lightly as he found Martin playing a game on his workstation.

The boy had taken to computers like a duck to water and after dinner he could often be found playing or surfing. Almost as if he sensed that something was coming, Martin did not smile his usual greeting and continue playing, he shut of the game and looked at Jesse seriously.

"We need to talk," Jesse said and offered the child his hand, "about your future."

Martin slipped his smaller hand into Jesse's and climbed out of the chair; perfectly willing to follow wherever Jesse wanted to go. The calm, soulful eyes the boy turned on him almost made Jesse's heart break.

"You know I love you, right?" Jesse asked when they finally reached a quiet spot where they were unlikely to be disturbed.

"I love you too," Martin replied, which made Jesse smile.

The whole team had come to love the boy; he was part of their family now, but Jesse felt a special connection.

"Well sometimes," he continued to explain, "we have to do things for those we love that we don't want to because we know it will be best for them."

He really didn't want to give up Martin, even if the youngster did curb his sex life and make him worry about the most ridiculous things. If he had not known quite how dangerous his life was and quite how impossible it was for him to live like a normal human being, he would have seriously considered leaving Mutant X and trying for something where he could have kept Martin.

"You're sending me away," Martin said with the uncanny perception that made him such an extraordinary child.

"Not far," Jesse said, not even trying to deny it, "and I will visit all the time, we all will, but somewhere you'll be safe and be a regular kid. Adam has found a really neat family for you and they already have another kid about your age so you'll have someone to be friends with."

He was trying to be upbeat, but the sadness in Martin's eyes mirrored his own and on impulse he dragged the boy into a hug.

"I will never be more than a call or an email away," he promised, holding the small version of himself close. "You're my little brother as far as I'm concerned and nothing will ever change that. I'm feral and you can never shake us."

Martin clung to him as hard as he was clinging to Martin and he did not want to let go. How a child he had found disconcerting on their first meeting had crawled so completely into his heart he wasn't sure, but it had definitely happened. Eventually they had to break apart and he could see unshed tears in Martin's eyes.

"Hey," he said, brushing away the dampness gently before the tears could fall, "we have a week before you have to move and we're going to have a great time. We'll visit your new family as well and if you hate them I'll make sure Adam tries again. I'm not leaving you, okay?"

The small boy took a deep breath, swallowing the hurt and then nodded at him, trying to smile. It was clear that Martin could see this was as difficult for Jesse as it was for him and that made it all the harder.

"Come on," Jesse said, refusing to give in to the melancholy that threatened, "let's go have some fun."

This had to be, it was what was right for Martin and Jesse refused to give in to his selfish desires. He was not losing Martin, he was just gaining more extended family and that was how he was determined to look at it.

====

Staring at a wall was not exactly the activity of choice for most individuals and normally Jesse would have found it very boring, but he was trying to think and it gave the rest of him something to do while his mind worked. He was so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he didn't even notice Shalimar walking up to him until she was no more than a few feet away. These days that was unusual.

"Hey, Jess," she greeted warmly, "we're just about ready to take Martin to his new home, are you coming?"

It was that very event that had started Jesse's mind spinning and he nodded absently.

"I'll be there in a minute," he said with a small frown and did not turn to look at her.

Jesse really didn't expect the feral to let him get away with such a vague answer and he was not surprised when his companion sat down beside him.

"What's up, Jesse?" Shalimar asked openly. "You look worried."

"Not worried, just not sure what to do," he admitted after a few moments.

"If you're worried about Martin, don't be," Shalimar said in a supportive tone, "he's only going a few miles down the coast. I'm sure you can visit him any time you want."

Now Jesse turned to look at his companion and she stopped talking when she saw his face.

"It's not exactly Martin," he admitted with a sigh, "but he did get me thinking. As far as the world is concerned Jesse Kilmartin is dead and buried, I was trying to decide if it should stay that way."

Shalimar's sympathetic smile disappeared and her expression became very serious.

"You have family, Jesse," she said slowly, "and I know you've not exactly been close lately, but family is family."

"Mutant X is my family," Jesse replied evenly, "you've been my family for a long time now and you are the only ones who know I'm alive."

With calm certainty Shalimar took his hands and made Jesse look at her.

"The only reason Adam didn't tell your family you were alive was because he wanted you well before you had to go through that," she said firmly. "I saw your mother at the funeral; she was distraught. She needs to know that you are still with us."

"You don't know my family," Jesse said and pulled his hands away, turning back to the wall. "It's easier for them this way. Jesse the freak is dead and they can remember him fondly without having to worry that he'll show up at a family gathering. I like to pretend I have great parents, but you already know that's not true. Maybe it's time I face reality and just leave things as they are."

Jesse knew his tone was bitter, but he couldn't help himself; his childhood had been less than straightforward and coming back from the dead had made him face a few home truths.

"Jesse," Shalimar said evenly, "a mother who loses her cub is never again whole."

Then she stood up and began to walk away.

"We leave in ten," she added as an after thought and left Jesse to his musings.

Shalimar might have been right, but Jesse was not sure he wanted to take the risk. It was equally possible that his mother would turn around and refuse to believe the truth, after all Jesse was technically not the same person any more. His DNA was different, his fingerprints were different; just about the only thing he had to prove who he was, was his mind. Would that be enough for a family who had really not known how to deal with him in the first place?

Totally undecided as to what to do, he picked himself up off the floor where he was sitting and wandered towards the hanger bay.

====

It was late and everything was quiet, even Shalimar couldn't hear anything accept the quiet running of Sanctuary's infrastructure. She was lying in her alcove in a post-coital haze between Brennan and Jesse and she was quite content. Sex had been good, but quite frankly this was the part that meant the most to her. Brennan had fallen asleep behind her as she was cocooned in his arms and she was holding Jesse in the same way in front of her. Shalimar felt loved and happy.

Jesse was not yet completely asleep and she gently stroked his hair as he dozed lightly. Letting Martin go had been quite hard on him, but he seemed pleased to re-establish the relationship with Shalimar and Brennan that had been on hold while the child was around. The feral had been unsure that Jesse would have wanted to leap back in quite so quickly, but it had been Jesse who had initiated the encounter.

This was not the simplest of relationships and all three of them brought quite a lot of emotional baggage with them, but Shalimar did not really care about that. This was good; it felt right and she was not going to let anything change that.

She and Brennan had talked a lot since the trio's first afternoon together and she had no doubt that her original lover was in this for the long haul. The protective team leading instincts that Brennan had always displayed had not taken long to morph into much more personal ones where Jesse was concerned and the two men were completely comfortable in each other's presence. Brennan would always be the alpha male, but Jesse seemed to have adjusted to that; in fact since his feral had emerged, he seemed better adjusted to it than he ever had before.

It was not always easy to understand Jesse; he was such a mixture of human and feral that his reactions were strange to both sides of the equation. When it came to sex he was all feral, when it came to emotional response he was somewhere in between. Shalimar doubted that half the time Jesse knew how he'd react himself and the conversation they had had that morning had surprised her. Jesse was no longer close to his family, especially after the debacle with his father, but suggesting that he might never let them know he was alive seemed contrary to his nature; Jesse would never let someone suffer if he could do something about it.

The conundrum that was Jesse was very complex these days and, although Shalimar was confident that they would work through any problems he may have, she was definitely going to keep a close eye on him for some time to come.

Hence one of the reasons she was still awake. Falling asleep tucked between the two men she loved most in the world would have been easy, but she was not going to do so until Jesse fell asleep first.

Shalimar thought that he was about to drift off when suddenly he spoke.

"Shal," he said quietly in a tone that indicated he had been pondering a subject for some time.

"Yeah, Jess," she said equally as quietly.

"You know Adam thinks I killed Praeteise accidentally?" Jesse continued softly.

"Uh-hmm," Shalimar replied, still stroking his hair.

"You know I didn't, right?" he said in little more than a whisper. "You know I knew exactly what I was doing?"

"Yes, love," she reassured him calmly, "I know. It was the only thing to do."

Adam had not actually asked Jesse why Praeteise had died; the scientist had assumed that since the young mutant saved everyone else he had simply not been able to control his gestalt that soon after initialising it. Shalimar on the other hand had been there and she had seen the fury in Jesse's eyes. She did not know what Brennan thought about the incident, but she doubted the elemental believed as Adam did. Their scientist leader was an idealist; several of his team were not. Adam would have tried to save Praeteise, redeem him somehow, the way he had tried to redeem Ashlocke, but Shalimar was of the opinion that the only safe option had been the one Jesse took.

After her reply, Jesse relaxed completely again as if her words were all he needed to set the matter to rest. He was close to falling asleep, Shalimar could tell, but he was not quite there yet. It would not be long now and then she would be able to fall asleep certain in the knowledge that her mates were safe. This was not simply another relationship for Shalimar; this was forever.

End of Chapter 8

Chapter 9 Epilogue

Jesse sat behind the wheel looking at the house through the half open driver's window of the car. It was a large impressive house and it had been in his family for three generations. Technically it should have been his home, but since his parents had split it had not exactly been a cradle of love. Coping with a marriage split and a rebellious child who could phase through things must have been difficult, but Jesse was pretty sure his mother could have done a better job than she had.

The easy option was to start the car and leave his past behind forever, but Shalimar's words would not let him go; 'A mother who loses her cub is never again whole.' Jesse knew his mother deserved better than that. So far he had been sitting in the car for nearly an hour and still hadn't scraped together enough courage to go up to the house.

Jesse had turned the radio off and taken the keys out of the ignition ten minutes before, but he hadn't yet opened the door. After all he'd been through the past months this should have been the easy part, after all it wasn't as if he hadn't known his mother all his life. He decided suddenly that he was being ridiculous and he'd come this far so he might as well get on with it. Before he could change his mind, Jesse pressed the button to close the window, grabbed the door handle, climbed out of the car and slammed the door behind him. He barely registered the bleep of the central locking as he walked resolutely towards the gate.

He was halfway across the road when he decided that the gate was a bad idea and shifted direction to the garden wall. The high structure was designed to keep intruders out, but then most intruders couldn't walk through it like it wasn't there. It took Jesse only a couple of seconds to phase straight through the wall and then he was in the copse of trees at the end of the garden. The house had security, but Jesse knew where all of it was; he'd even hacked into the supplier's records to make sure it hadn't been updated. Moving to the other side of the house was easy and he intended to slip in the back door to check out the lay of the land before he actually made contact.

What brought his plan to a sudden halt was the sight he found in the back garden. There was a fishpond halfway down the garden with a stone bench in front of it; it had been one of Jesse's favourite places when he had lived there. He could have been found watching the fish on many occasions when he needed to get away from his family.

Sat on the bench staring at the water was the motionless figure of his mother. She was dressed all in black and she was staring at the ripples on the pond's surface. Jesse could not see her face from his vantage point and almost silently he moved closer. The woman did not react at all even when Jesse ended up standing just behind her and he was reflected in the water. Now he was here he really didn't know what to say.

"Hi, Jesse," his mother said suddenly still staring at the pond, "I knew if I'd find you anywhere it would be here. That dismal cemetery just isn't you; I knew you wouldn't stay."

After the initial shock of being spoken to so calmly wore off, Jesse started to realise that his mother wasn't really talking to him. Her voice held the dreamy quality of someone talking to something that wasn't there; she thought his reflection was a hallucination. Jesse had never seen his mother like this and for a

few moments he was frozen in place. Eventually he reached out his hand and put it on her shoulder.

"Mom," he said quietly at a loss for anything else to say.

His mother looked round sharply and stared up at him as if she didn't really see him at first. Then she blinked and her eyes filled with tears as her expression became one of wonder.

"Jesse?" she said hesitantly, as if she was afraid this was a dream.

The question was so desperate and confused that Jesse found his heart in his throat. He had never expected this. The other members of Mutant X had told him how distraught his mother had been at the funeral, but he had not really believed them. His family were of a stoic breed and big shows of emotions were kept behind closed doors. Looking into her eyes now, Jesse had a revelation; his mother loved him with all her heart.

"Yes, Mom," he told her in no more than a whisper, "it's really me."

With a heartfelt sob the woman stood up and enfolded Jesse in a tight hug. It was stunning to him; his dad had been a hugger, but his mother had never been one for outwards signs of affection and the move took him completely by surprise. Slowly he returned the gesture. It was the first time he could remember since he was a small boy that his mother had taken him in her arms, since before his powers had first shown themselves. It was then that it occurred to him that maybe he hadn't been the only one afraid of his mutation. He also considered the idea that his 'death' might be the perfect excuse to wipe the slate clean and start again. His mother had obviously changed and for once it felt, if not good, then at least okay to be home.

Eventually his mother pulled back and just looked at him. Tears were rolling down her face and she looked so genuinely joyful at seeing him that he could find nothing to say. Jesse had no previous experience with his mother in this state to know how to react, but she didn't seem to care.

"My little boy's home," she said and enveloped him in a hug again.

====

Shalimar turned to Brennan where they were hiding in the bushes and they shared a surprised look.

"Well that was not what I was expecting," Brennan said slowly.

Shalimar had to nod, she for one had not expected the meeting to go in quite that manner. Hysterics had been a definite possibility, but from her viewpoint all she saw was completely genuine emotion. It had been she who insisted that they follow Jesse on his return home, but it wasn't as if Brennan had taken much persuading. Sneaking around behind people's backs was not something Shalimar always approved of, but when it came to Jesse's welfare she was quite happy to do anything necessary. At the moment paranoia was her middle name.

"If she hurts him I'll rip her heart out," she said succinctly and turned to head back the way they had come.

"That would be difficult to explain," Brennan commented as he followed her, "maybe you should let me electrocute her; much easier to cover up."

Shalimar glanced back to give her companion a long hard look. Brennan did not look as if he was making fun of her.

"What, I'm not allowed to be protective as well?" Brennan said with a half smile.

It had been a long tense morning, but at that Shalimar finally grinned.

"I still think the ripping the heart out is more epic," she replied and went back to crawling through the undergrowth.

The End