

## Broken

### Emma

The arrangement had been a mistake. Emma recognized that now. It hurt too much. She couldn't do this -- couldn't share Brennan with Shalimar any longer. At one time, it had seemed a perfect answer to the strange love triangle they found themselves in: both she and Shalimar fallen in love with the same man, and said man unable to choose between them. Yes, it had seemed reasonable: share -- or risk losing Brennan forever. And she had truly believed she could do it. After all, she loved them both. They were her friends; they risked their lives together every day, counting on each other to watch their backs. Friends shared -- so why not share their bodies?

And at first it worked as she imagined it would. As exciting as the days could be, when they thwarted Eckhart's evil schemes and saved the lives of countless new mutants, she lived for the nights with Brennan. He taught her things about her body she'd never dreamt possible. He knew exactly when to be gentle and when she longed for a firmer touch. She even spent a few nights with him and Shalimar both, together in Brennan's big bed, making love until dawn and finally falling asleep in a tangle of sweaty arms and legs.

But as time progressed, Emma came to realize something: insecurity bred jealousy. And jealousy bred pain. Pain that multiplied and expanded day by day, until she felt as if her heart might implode beneath its force every single time Brennan smiled at Shalimar.

*He desires her more*, a small voice kept whispering in Emma's head. Sometimes it retreated to the back of her consciousness, sometimes --like tonight, when she was convinced Brennan was with Shalimar-- it screamed in the forefront. He would grow tired of her one day. After all, Shalimar had so much more to offer than she did: the blond was breathtakingly beautiful, with long, graceful legs and high, firm breasts. On top of that she possessed an open, outgoing personality, and was always up for a bit of teasing or sparring, or a practical joke played on the others. Compare that to her: she was plain-looking, and not very experienced in all matters sexual; he couldn't spar with her like he did with Shalimar, always afraid he might hurt her. Shalimar was Brennan's match in every way. And *she* was a charity case. Pathetic.

A tear slipped from her eye, and Emma brushed it away without noticing it. This sharing thing -- it was slowly killing her inside. She wondered what would happen first: would she end up dead and numb inside with her heart shattered in a thousand pieces? Or would Brennan get enough of her and dump her in favor of Shalimar? Neither was a particularly appealing prospect. And she'd be damned if she stuck around to find out.

She grabbed a backpack from her closet and began stuffing it with clothes, ripped from the hangers and drawers at random. It was hard to see through the tears that clouded her vision, but the longer she thought about it, the more convinced she became that she was doing the right thing for all involved.

She was a grown woman, who should take firm control of her life. But she couldn't do so right here, where every inch of the compound reminded her of Brennan. She was smart, she had a tight grasp on her power, and she could fend for herself. Adam would understand. And Brennan and Shalimar would be free to build a life together, enjoy each other without having to worry about Emma's feelings.

When the pack was full, Emma stood up and slung it over one shoulder. Her eyes, though red-rimmed, were dry as she gave her room --her home for the past year-- a final look.

She pulled the door shut behind her and tiptoed through the empty halls of Sanctuary. She'd use the Double Helix, have it take her to the edge of its range, far away from here, where they wouldn't be able to find her. Then she'd send the plane back on autopilot.

Emma never looked back as Stormking Mountain fell away behind her, a jagged, dark shape in the dark night.

## **Brennan**

Brennan paced the length of his room, taking long strides that made the room seem smaller than it really was. Blue fire danced along his fingers. How dare Adam lecture him! How dare he challenge the relationship Brennan had with Shalimar and Emma. It was none of Adam's business! The more his ire rose at the memory of the talking to he received from Adam, the harder it was to control the electricity within. At last he felt so close to bursting it hurt.

Brennan flung out his right hand and lightning streamed across the room, through the open bathroom door. It hit a sponge tottering on the edge of the bath. The sponge burst into flames and tumbled from the edge. It hit a small puddle of water left in the tub. An angry hiss, a brief burst of white steam, and the danger had passed. Brennan felt much better.

Unfortunately, so he quickly discovered, having expunged his system of righteous anger also made him more clear-headed. And a clear mind led to serious thinking. Was Adam wrong? Or was he risking the team with his ongoing affair with the two girls? They seemed okay with their relationship, didn't they? Hell, they were the ones to suggest it in the first place! Sure, perhaps it wasn't very conventional, but what was a guy to do when two beautiful women professed their love for him? Two women he cared for

deeply, and whom he had no intention of hurting. If he was forced to choose one over the other, someone was going to end up hurt, and he couldn't bear that. Thus, Brennan had embraced the suggestion with all his heart and soul, thinking it was the best solution to an impossible dilemma.

Until Adam told him it was destroying the team.

When he was completely honest, Brennan had to admit that Adam did have a point. Over the past couple of weeks, Emma had grown more and more morose, withdrawing into herself. She wasn't eating as well as she should, and it showed in the paleness of her skin and the lackluster of her once so shiny hair.

Then, this morning, he had caught her watching them as he trained with Shalimar. The look in her eyes, full of endless despair, took his breath away. His hip still showed the bruise where Shalimar's foot had caught him unawares while he was trying to process what he'd seen on Emma's face.

Shalimar had laughed, until she followed his gaze. Her features hardened, and she'd scolded Emma for distracting Brennan. Although her words were playful, Brennan hadn't failed to notice the underlying anger, which belied a possessiveness much the same as that of a lion defending its mate from another. Never mind that Shalimar was the female.

So, now he found himself again faced with that terrible choice. Emma or Shal. Shal or Emma. He loved them both, but knew he was in love with neither. He couldn't choose. He couldn't hurt either of them by picking the other. And Adam was right: he couldn't allow their threesome to tear the team apart. No, Brennan decided, he had only one option left: break it off. Choose neither.

Easier said than done. It wouldn't matter how gently he tried to let them down -- it was going to be immensely painful for all involved. And although Sanctuary was a big place, there was no avoiding each other. They lived together, ate together, trained together, and worked together.

No, simply ending their affair wasn't enough; he needed to take himself out of the equation. It was the best way to keep most of the team intact. He'd leave Sanctuary, leave Mutant X. They'd manage without him, maybe even find another elemental with similar powers.

Brennan rubbed his brow; he sensed a headache forming. How could he have let things get out of hand so terribly? Allow his baser needs to destroy the wonderful life he found with Mutant X? Adam, the girls, Jesse, they had become his family. The only family he'd

known since his mother died. And that was nearly two decades ago.

He'd miss them.

He glanced at his watch. Not yet 3 a.m. If he took the Audi, he could be miles away before the others woke up. He'd call Jesse in a couple of days to tell him where to pick up the car.

Twin beams of lights lit Brennan's way as the gray car sped away in the night.

### **Shalimar**

Shalimar prowled the deep bowels of Sanctuary. The small, dark tunnels beneath the living quarters where no one ever came were her refuge. Here, she could work off some excess energy when everyone else was asleep, or do some thinking when life got hard. The soft ticking and clunking in the pipes --air, water, sewage-- formed a calming backdrop that helped her collect her thoughts. Tonight, however, the soft sounds did nothing to soothe her. She was too agitated to sit still, let alone sleep.

When she suggested to Emma they share Brennan, after discovering they had both fallen for with their teammate, it had seemed so acceptable. What Shalimar had not counted on, was the possessive streak she discovered in herself. She hadn't reckoned on her mind keeping score, or her brain tallying up every touch, every smile, and every minute of his time that Brennan bestowed on Emma. She certainly hadn't expected the anger she felt when that mental scale dipped in Emma's favor. When she found out that Brennan spent the evening researching with Emma, while she and Jesse were out to escort a new mutant to a safe house. When he smiled at Emma over breakfast twice, and only once in her own direction. And today, when she'd caught him staring at Emma, that anger had flared in bright hot flames within. It burned like one of those fires she was so afraid of. It threatened to consume her with its fiery tongues, and it was all she could do not to jump from the dojo, pound on Emma and rip her throat out, growling 'mineminemine' while she did so.

The episode, the near loss of control, had scared Shalimar deeper than she was willing to admit even to herself. She'd never come so close to losing it, never come so close to allowing the animal within roam free and act on its every primal urge. Today, the tight reign she held on her power had slipped, leaving her to teeter on the brink from which she barely managed to pull back.

And what about next time? What if she *did* snap? Emma would get hurt. Emma, who was her best friend, and her confidante. She deserved better. She loved Brennan. And Brennan loved her.

Emma also was good for him, a much better influence than Shalimar herself. With Emma around, Brennan acted more careful, approaching a dangerous situation more cautiously than he ever did with Shalimar. Caution kept them alive. If something happened to Brennan or Emma because of her... Shalimar couldn't bear imagine the loss of her friends, or their friendship.

Her bike called to her from the garage. *Ride me*, it said. *Ride off into the night, never look back. They'll be safe then. Safe from you. Safe from the ferocious beast within. Ride me.*

She was startled to find herself standing beside her bike. She had no recollection how she got here. But the little voice inside her head was right. If she was gone, she couldn't hurt them. It would be easier to control her feral side without the constant temptation, without the incessant reminders of the biggest mistake in her life: suggesting they could share Brennan.

The moon was dipping low to the horizon when a dark shadow roared to the west on a screaming motor cycle.

Jesse

Jesse rolled over on his side to stare at the red numbers on the nightstand for what must be the twentieth time that night. It was a few minutes shy of six in the morning. His room was shrouded in darkness but he knew that outside the sky to the east would be pale with the oncoming day. It was a relief to find that another sleepless night was almost over, yet the thought of another day at Sanctuary weighed heavily in his chest.

Life with Mutant X was no longer as pleasant it had been. Gone was the camaraderie he once shared with his teammates. Gone also the sense of togetherness, of fighting for the same goals. It had all slipped away like a thief in the night. And no matter how hard he tried, Jesse couldn't recall when things started to go wrong. When he first realized he felt out of place. When he no longer recognized his teammates. When his friends decided to shut him out of their lives.

He tried figuring out where it had gone wrong. Did it have to do with Emma, whom he had fallen in love with the day she first arrived at Sanctuary? Lay the problem with Shalimar, his buddy from the early days? Perhaps it was Brennan, with his overpowering presence?

He remembered walking in on the others one afternoon, a few days ago. Their heads had been together, and they had been whispering in low tones, laughing a little and smiling a lot. Yet, Jesse sensed the underlying tension, the almost audible hum of a spring coiled too tight. When he greeted them, they had sprung apart, their faces showing guilt and

the smiles they offered him anything but genuine.

So *he* was the problem. But what was wrong with him that they couldn't tell him their secrets any longer?

Truthfully, it didn't matter anymore. When that sense of togetherness had vanished, so had his sense of purpose, of belonging, of adding something to the cause. He was no longer wanted. Perhaps it was time to move on. Make room for another, who would be more to their liking, who would fit the team better.

It would hurt if he could no longer see Emma's soft smile, or the hard, intense look she wore when scanning someone. He'd miss Shalimar's easy humor, and the friendship he thought he found when another guy joined the team. But in reality, hadn't he lost them already?

He was alone, among friends who had become strangers. It would hurt less to be simply alone.

His mind made up, Jesse hurried to throw some clothes together. He needed to leave quickly, before the others woke up and he would have to tell them he was leaving. He wouldn't be able to bear the concealed relief on their faces.

Once he entered the garage, his anger flared briefly. The Helix was gone, and so were the car and Shalimar's bike. It didn't upset him so much that it meant he was without transportation. His feet were young, and he could walk to the city before catching a bus to elsewhere. What mattered was that even now, as he was about to disappear from their lives, they managed to make him feel unwanted. They shut him out one last time when they had gone on some mission without telling him.

Jesse began walking in the pink light of a new dawn.

## **Adam**

Adam sat up with a start, for a moment confused by his surroundings. He groaned at the stab of pain when the kinks in his neck straightened themselves. A thousand tiny needles pierced his right arm when the blood flow was restored. He clucked wryly. He ought to know better than permitting himself to fall asleep on a stool in his lab.

At least, he thought with gratitude, he woke early enough that the others were still asleep. Although he enjoyed having those kids around, they were a pain sometimes. He could just imagine what they would say when they found him sleeping with his cheek resting against a microscope. Shalimar would laugh and tease him. Emma'd scold him

that he should take better care of himself. Brennan would probably crack a joke about old men trying to pull an all-nighter. And Jesse would simply smile in understanding that a job needed to be finished before one could have some downtime.

Yes, they were a handful. But they were *his* kids, and he loved them dearly. Already, he felt guilty over criticizing Brennan yesterday. They were adults. If they wanted to pursue a love triangle, who was he to forbid it? They were mature enough not to let it destroy the team, right?

Exactly.

Perhaps, Adam decided while walking out of the lab, he would surprise them with a hearty breakfast. He'd have to hurry, though. It couldn't be long before Sanctuary resounded with their banter again.

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