

Elemental Child

"Beeeeep." The heart rate monitor in Trauma One of St. John's Hospital's emergency room shrieked in alarm: its patient had flatlined.

"Beeeeep. Beep." In rooms Three and Six the patients went into arrest at the same time-- or so their monitors said.

In a fourth room another piece of equipment exploded, showering the bed with sparks. The elderly woman occupying it screamed in shock, although the sparks extinguished before they could do her any harm.

A thin tendril of smoke climbed from the broken machine to the ceiling. When it reached the smoke detector, the fire alarm added its clang to the high-pitched beep of the heart rate monitors. A second later, the security system set off the sprinklers throughout the entire floor. Within seconds, nurses, doctors, and patients alike became drenched.

"What the hell?" the resident doctor on call managed to mutter before two nurses pushed him aside in their attempt to get clear of the downpour. His arms flailed as he tried to keep his balance and stop himself from crashing face-forward upon a ruptured appendix case waiting to be taken upstairs to surgery.

Outside the emergency room, a redheaded woman threaded her way with awkward steps down the incline that led from the hospital doors to the pavement. It should have been an easy walk; the ramp was built for wheelchairs and thus wasn't very steep -- except her belly was swollen so much, and she was top-heavy and hard-pressed to see her feet. She wore a denim overall that provided room for her bulk, and a yellow and white striped shirt. Despite the overcast day, she didn't wear her jacket, but carried it folded over her arms, as if she had just stepped out a moment ago. Once she reached the end of the ramp, she unfolded the coat and tried to shrug into it while casting a weary glance over her shoulder at the hospital's entrance at the same time. Flashing lights and shadowy figures of nurses and aides dashing back and forth were visible through the sliding glass doors.

"Here, let me help you with that."

Startled, the woman turned around to find a paramedic looking down at her. A veteran paramedic, he appeared in his late forties, with a balding pate and gray streaks in his reddish-brown beard. He had just delivered a patient with a broken leg to the ER. His eyes twinkled with kindness, and she relaxed a little. He gestured at the jacket.

"Oh. Yes. Thank you."

She waited for him to hold up the jacket, then wriggled her arms into the sleeves.

"What's going on in there?" he asked while she zippered up.

She shrugged. "Don't know. Equipment failure, I think one of the nurses said. It got pretty crazy so I thought I'd better get out of their way. Thanks." She began to waddle down the sidewalk.

"Hey!" he called and she looked over her shoulder. "Are you sure you want to leave? You look about ready to--" He nodded at her belly.

"To pop?" She offered him a thin smile that never reached her eyes. "Don't worry, I'm fine. It's not my time yet."

She was glad to find she sounded more confident than she felt. She wasn't sure how much time she had left. She didn't think her labor had started yet, although this was her first pregnancy and she wasn't exactly certain of the actual sensations. It would be soon, though. The havoc her presence created in the emergency room of St. John's Hospital was ample proof that her baby was getting ready.

She sighed, blinking back tears and folding her hands protectively around her stomach. She was more scared than ever before in her life. The hospital had been her last hope. She needed help; she couldn't deliver this baby by herself.

There was one other person she could turn to, who would understand what was happening with her baby. The one person she had wanted to avoid at all cost. She really, really, didn't want to tell him the truth. What she had done to him was horrible enough without such long-lasting consequences. But now she didn't think she had any choice left. She needed to go to the father of her child, beg him to help her, if that's what it took.

The woman rounded the corner, heading for an address she had only visited once. Behind her, three black Isuzus with dark, tinted windows, came tearing down the road and squealed to a stop in front of the hospital's entrance. She never noticed as their occupants, all grim-faced men wearing charcoal-colored raincoats and earpieces, jumped out, raced up the incline, and rushed into the emergency room.

oOo

"Okay, Jim, Annalore, these are your new identity cards." Emma gave the young man

and woman each a plastic chip card with their picture pasted on it. "And these," she offered them a dark blue envelope, "are your bus tickets. One way to Seattle, Washington. Someone will be waiting when you arrive to help you settle in."

"Thank you." Annalore wrapped her arms around Emma. "Thank you so much, and thanks to Adam for helping us."

"I second that." Jim, Annalore's boyfriend, grinned as he shook Emma's hand. She tried not to wince at the strong grip.

They couldn't have looked more different, Emma thought with a smile. Annalore, a tiny slip of girl with straight black hair and dark, slanted eyes, and Jim, who was a well-built Scandinavian-looking young man, with sandy curls and blue eyes. What the eye didn't see, however, but what she knew lurked below the surface, were their new mutant powers. "So, you're all set to g--"

A knock on the door interrupted her.

"Who's that?" A note of renewed fear crept into Annalore's voice. Her eyes flashed yellow for a moment, and she inched closer to her boyfriend. He took her small hand in his big ones and squeezed gently. Fear of capture by the Genetic Security Agency ran deep with new mutants.

"Don't worry," Emma assured them. "Nobody knows the location of this safe house."

Despite her assurances the brunette's heart was beating in her throat. She didn't believe they were in danger, but any safe house could be compromised by the GSA. After all, it had happened before. Except... GS agents wouldn't knock, would they?

No, they would come barging through the door, guns drawn, coats flapping, faces cold and emotionless.

Emma waved for the others to hide in the other room and tiptoed up the stairwell to the door. "Who is it?" She commended herself for managing to keep the tremor out of her voice.

A woman's voice answered, weakly. "Please, help me."

Emma pulled the door open a bit. In the dim light of the alley, she could make out a single person, a woman. Something was familiar about her. Emma racked her brain, searching for the memory. The red hair was cropped shorter, but the startling azure eyes were the same. They even wore the same haunted look.

"Ashley!" Emma flung the door open wide. She got a better look at the other woman.
"Wow..."

Ashley's knees gave way and she crumbled into Emma's arms.

oOo

"Adam? Adam!" Emma raised her voice, like she hoped that speaking louder would help her get through to the Sanctuary. Static hissed from her com-link.

She glanced over at Ashley while waiting for a response. The woman was exhausted and very frightened. It didn't take a tele-empath to know what she was feeling; it was written clear on her face. Jim had helped Emma to get her down the stairs and to the couch. Annalore sat beside her. The younger girl was wringing her hands. She wanted to help Ashley but didn't know what to do.

"Emma? Everyth-- all --ght? You keep break-- up." It was Jesse who responded. He sounded worried.

"I'm fine. I need help, though. Ashley Elliott showed up. And she's pregnant."

"Who is what? Emma, I didn't quite catch that."

The static grew worse until Jesse's words were broken into curt, unconnected syllables, and Emma's brain labored to string the sounds back together to form words and sentences.

"Just get Adam here, all right?" Emma was yelling, as though she thought volume would equal intelligibility. Annalore and Ashley gave her a wary look. Jim frowned. She forced herself to speak in a normal tone. "I'll explain later."

"Okay. Wait--Adam--safe house--careful."

Wait there. I'll get Adam. We'll come to the safe house. Be careful. Her mind filled in the missing pieces, the words that Jesse spoke and that never made it across the airwaves. It was a relief when he signed off and the screech of static died. Silence descended once again over the safe house.

Emma walked over to the other three. "It's going to be all right now, Ashley. Adam's on his way. He'll fix whatever is wrong with you. I mean--" She flushed.

She moved her gaze from the pregnant woman to the other two new mutants. "Hey, you guys. Don't you have a bus to catch?"

"Are you sure?" Annalore's tone belied the doubtful question; she seemed eager to leave. Emma couldn't fault her.

"Yeah. We'll be fine. You heard Jesse. He'll be here with the Double Helix in no time to pick us up. You two go. Have a good life. And stay safe."

More hugs and handshakes, and then the two lovers walked up the stairs to disappear into the night. Emma sat down on the edge of the couch. "So, what happened?"

"I went to the hospital for help. But the baby... Everything went berserk. Monitors, scanners, the lights. Even the sprinklers went off in some of the rooms. I got scared, so I ran."

"Are you saying the baby did all that?"

Ashley nodded. "It's picking up on my emotions. When I get upset or afraid, electronics tend to burn out."

"Hmm. That would explain the static on the com-link." Emma watched how Ashley's belly rippled beneath her clothes when the baby shifted. "I better tell Adam when he gets here. If we put you on the Helix and the baby gets upset, we'd end up a splotch on the pavement. I'm surprised, though. I didn't think new mutant children showed any abilities until they are four or five years old. I suppose the baby's father is a new mutant too?"

Ashley looked away. A bright burst of guilt from her mind hit Emma without warning. She flinched at its intensity.

"You weren't planning on telling him."

The redhead shook her head. "The baby's my responsibility. I did a terrible thing, and the consequences are mine to bear."

"I see," Emma said, and realized that she did. Even so: "It's still his child, too." Her voice was soft, her tone gently chiding. "Don't you think he has a right to know?"

"I wanted to tell him, I really did! But I'm so--"

"Scared. I know." Emma reached out and brushed a strand of hair from Ashley's face.

"Please, don't tell him." The startlingly blue eyes glistened.

"I won't. But I think you should. Ashley, I'm sure he'll understand. Okay?"

Ashley sniffled and nodded. "Okay. I'll tell him."

"Good." Emma smiled. "Now, close your eyes and get some rest. It'll be a little while before Jesse gets here."

oOo

"Mr. Eckhart? Sir?"

The door behind Mason Eckhart opened and right hand man number umpteen entered. Eckhart didn't take his eyes off of the stasis pods humming away quietly below. He had forgotten the agent's name and face. He was just another incompetent in an endless string of incompetents. Even the threat of getting locked in one of those pods couldn't get the idiots to deliver.

"Sir, we intercepted a radio transmission from one of the Mutant X safe houses. It was directed at their Sanctuary."

Eckhart turned around. This news was interesting enough to warrant some of his attention.

He raised an eyebrow. "Really? And how, pray tell, do you know that it was a Mutant X call you heard?" Adam's jamming devices prevented any intercepts. If they didn't, this Mutant X nonsense would have been taken care of years ago.

"Well, Sir--" The minion withered beneath the cold stare. "Actually, we only recorded bits and pieces of the conversation. Apparently, some sort of magnetic disturbance interfered with the transmission, which is how we managed to catch it in the first place."

"Ah." It made sense, Eckhart decided. But what use would his plans have for snatches of a conversation among his archenemies? "And?"

"We ran the recording through the computer, had the system fill in the missing parts. If I may?" The minion gestured with a small disk. Eckhart nodded, and he inserted it into the player. Two voices -- one male, one female -- sounded from the speaker.

"The voices have been identified as belonging to Emma DeLauro and Jesse Kilmartin, Sir."

Eckhart gritted his teeth. Mutant X, all right. Adam and his brats. The thorn in his side. "Play it again."

This time, he paid more attention to the words than to the voices. His brow rose. "A pregnant new mutant," he muttered. He wondered if she might be the same woman that those buffoons of his failed to apprehend at the hospital; it would be too much of a coincidence if she weren't. "We don't have any newborns enjoying our hospitality yet." Louder, he added an order: "Find Miss Elliot. And make sure she is in our custody before she gives birth."

The underling grinned. "Yessir. Right away, Sir."

Eckhart glared at him and the smirk dissipated. "Why do I get the feeling there's more you want to tell me?"

"We know the location of the safe house." The minion couldn't stop the grin from blooming back up on his idiotic face.

"Then what are you waiting for?" If Eckhart had been given to raising his voice, he would have screamed the words. As it was, his tone was cold enough to nearly turn his breath visible.

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"Uh oh. This is not good." Jesse grabbed Brennan's elbow and forced him to slow down. Five minutes ago they landed the Double Helix on a field nearby. They had cloaked the plane from view before walking toward the alley that hid the safe house entrance.

"What?" Brennan followed Jesse's pointed finger.

The door to the safe house stood wide open, like a yawning maw. The lock was splintered. They saw no movement in the darkness inside.

"Uh oh's right," Brennan agreed. He brought his hands together until energy crackled between his fingers.

On tiptoe, careful to make no noise, the two men approached the safe house entrance.

Jesse wished Shalimar were with them; her senses were so well honed that she'd have been able to hear the slightest noise from inside. As it was, the safe house appeared abandoned. He wasn't sure if that was a good sign, or bad.

Jesse took the first step down the stairs, ready to mass and protect Brennan from gunfire. Silence reigned the safe house. A single lamp was burning near the bottom of the stairs. Nothing moved in its feeble glow, but it did reveal the wreckage in the room. An overturned chair, a broken table, signs of a struggle and --

"Emma!" Jesse rushed down the last few steps and ran over to his teammate. She lay crumpled on the floor, half-hidden beneath a sofa seat pillow. "Emma?"

He carefully rolled her over. She shifted and whimpered as her eyes fluttered open. "Emma? You all right?" Jesse helped her sit up and whistled at the egg-sized bump on her forehead. "Wow. They got you pretty good. That looks like it's gotta hurt."

"Ow. You have no idea. They took Ashley. The GSA." Her eyes widened and swam slowly into focus. "Oh God, it is so scared!"

"Who? It?" Brennan, having made sure the safe house was indeed deserted, dropped to his knees on Emma's other side.

"Ashley's baby. I can sense it."

"Ashley? Ashley Elliott? The girl that almost killed me last year? She has a baby?" Brennan looked confused. "Jesse said you needed help here but--"

"I told you the connection was pretty bad. How the hell did the GSA know about this place, anyway?"

"They must have followed Ashley," Brennan concluded.

"No. She said she'd been careful. She was quite sure she wasn't being followed." Emma unsteadily got to her feet. Jesse hovered close, ready to catch her if she faltered.

"They might have intercepted your transmission," Jesse said. "If we were breaking up, then perhaps Adam's jamming equipment failed too."

"Well, in any case," Brennan said, picking up a book that was torn in half, "this safe house has been compromised. We better get out of here before they decide to come back." He gave the book a sad look and placed it on what was left of the table.

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Ashley struggled against the manacles that held her in the straight-backed metal chair. The cuffs didn't budge, keeping her firmly in place. She felt nauseated. She'd panicked when the GSA broke down the door and hauled her off. The baby had picked up on her feelings and in defense emitted electromagnetic pulses that were strong enough to interfere with its mother's own abilities. The queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach reminded Ashley of the days when she'd been mutating, causing her to hunger for power in a way that was beyond her control. She hoped this pregnancy wouldn't trigger another mutation episode. Right now, though, she had other, more pressing worries to concern her.

Like the white-haired, pasty-faced man gazing coldly down upon her.

"Miss Elliott. I'd be very interested to hear who the knave is that sired this child you're carrying."

Ashley warranted him an angry glare and pursed her lips. The white-haired guy, whom she thought to be Mason Eckhart, sighed.

"Please. You must realize we have ways to extract that information from you. Ways that are not nearly as pleasant as me asking you politely."

The baby stirred and Ashley swallowed down another wave of nausea as her stomach rolled. "I don't know," she muttered, her tone obstinate.

"You don't know. I see." Eckhart stared at her from behind his tinted glasses. "And you expect me to believe you." His tone grew colder and Ashley shivered. The temperature in the room appeared to have dropped several degrees. "The woman so loyal that she risked her life to save her wayward lover when she believed him to be held prisoner. And now you don't know which mutant aberration is the father?"

"No."

"Very well. It's your choice."

Eckhart gestured at someone behind her. A man she hadn't seen before stepped into her view. He was thin to the point of being emasculated, with a few wispy strands of gray hair vainly attempting to cover his shiny pate. He wore a white lab coat, the kind she associated with doctors.

Ashley's eyes were drawn to a small syringe in his hands, a wicked-looking needle sticking out of its end. "What are you going to do with that?" She couldn't keep the quiver from her voice.

"Get a DNA sample from the child," Eckhart said. He wasn't explaining to Ashley but issuing an order at the doctor. "I'm sure you'll find its father in our databases somewhere. I want to know who he is. And I want him delivered here today. Alive."

"Yes, Mr. Eckhart."

The doctor shoved her sleeve up and jammed the needle into her skin. Ashley screamed in pain and fear. The lights flickered crazily for a moment, before her world turned dark and she lost consciousness.

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"End scan," Adam ordered. The twin beams that illuminated Emma blinked out. Adam studied the screen for a few moments before he turned. Four pairs of expectant eyes were waiting for his verdict. Brennan lounged beside Emma in the other chair, while Jesse and Shalimar hovered near the doorway.

"At least that bump on your head doesn't seem to have any nasty side effects."

"Except for the headache," Emma grumbled and tentatively lifted a hand toward the egg-shaped lump on her skull. She winced when her fingers touched the tight skin.

"Except for that," Adam granted.

"A painkiller will take care of it," Shalimar suggested with a smile.

"No," Emma said. "I don't want it. Painkillers make me all fuzzy. You'll need me to find Ashley."

"I still don't understand why they took Ashley and left you." Jesse walked further into the room and took a seat beside Brennan. "Not that I'm not grateful, mind," he added quickly.

"Because Eckhart wants her baby," Adam surmised.

"But why?" Shalimar sounded confused. "New mutants have had babies before. He never was this interested in them."

"That," Adam admitted with a sigh, "I don't know."

"Because this baby is special," Emma said softly. "Its father is--" Her eyes flickered away for a moment and her cheeks colored a light pink. "Is another mutant," she finished.

"Another elemental."

"Is that so?" A deep crease appeared between Adam's brows, the furrow that Shalimar had dubbed the 'idea wrinkle'. "That could explain what you said before, Emma, about this baby's immense power before it's even born. With the right combination of genetic material--hmm." He began walking out of the lab, and the others trailed behind. "We have to find Ashley. We can't let Eckhart get his hands on that child."

"Any idea where they took her?" Brennan asked.

"No. He's not going to put her in stasis; at least not yet, so she could be in any of the Genomex compounds."

"She's at Genomex's headquarters," Emma said, her gaze distant. "In the eastern wing, all the way at the end."

"How can you pinpoint her location so exactly?" Shalimar asked. "You barely know Ashley."

Emma blinked. "I just know, all right?"

Adam frowned at her defensive tone. Shalimar asked a perfectly normal question; the stronger Emma's emotional connection to someone, the better her gift worked. He wondered if her power was growing. But getting Ashley out of Eckhart's hands was their first priority. Emma's powers and what might be happening to them could wait.

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Eckhart returned to his office. On the floor below the large picture window, the stasis pods hummed softly, the occupants dreaming their dreams undisturbed. He didn't look at the pods the way he usually did. Instead, he sat behind his desk, tapping the butt end of a pencil against the immaculate surface of the desk. His thoughts were running at top speed. To catch a pregnant mutant could be very promising, an unexpected boon to Harrison's floundering research projects. And if his suspicions were right, the brat's father was another elemental, like Ashley. Although mutants, like most creatures, tended to attract those most similar to themselves --invalidating the old adage that opposites

attract-- it was a rare find for Eckhart to discover a child born from such a union. And for some unknown reason this particular child was immensely powerful. Fortunately, the electrical disturbances that allowed them to intercept the Mutant X communications had forewarned them to its power. If not for the force field his people set up before the Elliott woman's arrival, the entire complex might have blacked out.

The bell chimed, announcing that someone was requesting an audience. Mason dropped the pencil and looked up. It better be Genetta with the DNA results. "Yes?" he called, hitting the button that opened the doors automatically.

He was pleased to see that it was indeed the doctor who entered.

The man glanced around curiously. He had never been inside Eckhart's inner sanctum before. Dr. Harrison usually liaised between the boss and the researchers. Genetta's job was in the hospital and consisted of patching up injured GS agents or prepping captured new mutants for stasis. But Dr. Harrison was out of town, attending a conference in Beijing on biogenetics and hereditary illnesses.

"Dr. Genetta. I take it you have good news for me?" Mason permitted himself a tiny smile, trying to appear friendly. He never realized (nor would he really care if someone told him) that it merely made him look like a python about to devour a mouse for dinner.

"Uh, yes, Mr. Eckhart. I think I do. We managed to extract a DNA sample from the baby. Sir, you wouldn't believe that child's genetic profile! "

"Oh, you have no idea what I believe," Eckhart mumbled. The doctor blinked and glanced at him in confusion. The head of Genomex gestured impatiently. "Go on."

"It took out the scanners," Genetta continued. "Even when removed from the subject, the DNA retained its electromagnetic properties for several minutes. That's why it took us so long: we had to wait until it had exhausted itself."

"The father?" Mason cut to the chase. He wasn't interested in excuses, only in results.

The doctor grinned. "Not a problem," he said. "You were right: the father is in our database. Agents are picking him up as we speak."

"Good." Eckhart nodded and turned to gaze out across the room filled with stasis pods. "Let me know as soon as they bring him here."

oOo

Brennan killed the Audi's engine. Before he could even take the keys from the ignition, Shalimar had jumped out of the front seat. "Let's go, you guys!"

Brennan chortled at her eagerness. Sometimes, Shalimar was like a fidgety cat, with too much energy.

The sprawling Genomex building bathed in the pink light of the rising sun. From their spot along the side of the road, he could see the security guards patrolling the entire length of the main building. A quick count told him there were at least eight. Every time Mutant X invaded the Genomex facility, the other side learned from the lesson and beefed up security. It was getting harder and harder to get in and out without being captured. But not impossible.

"You two cover the west, Brennan said. "I'll handle the guards on the east."

"Maybe we should stick together?" Jesse sounded dubious. "They look pretty attentive." It was still early in the morning, but not so early that the guards were sleepy and could be caught napping.

"Nah," Brennan said. "I can handle it. It'll be quicker."

They split up and Brennan slunk to the east wing of the building. The first guard was easy. He wasn't paying much attention to his surroundings, appearing more interested in the cigarette he held in his fingers. A quick burst of crackling blue fire took him out.

Brennan frowned at the boneless body at his feet. *Not much fun this way.* He liked a hands-on fight better. He was preparing to jump the next guard, when the soft click of a gun being cocked caused him to freeze in his tracks.

"Mr. Mulwray?"

Tiny strands of energy crackled along Brennan's fingertips. He slowly began to turn around. "Who wants to know?"

Before he could catch more than a glimpse of his attacker from the corner of his eye (carrot hair, dimpled face, one of Eckharts latest recruits), the hammer hit the firing pin and something small came zipping out of the gun's barrel. It hit the side of Brennan's neck, then all went dark.

oOo

Brennan's memories were fuzzy. His head throbbed, and he had a strange taste in his mouth. What the hell happened? He tried to dig up the last thing he remembered from the depths of his mind. Something about a red-headed kid pointing a gun at him. He groaned, as a subtle shift of his head caused it to pound even louder, like someone was trying to hack its way out of his skull with a sledgehammer. At least the kid hadn't killed him.

"Mr. Mulwray. I see you have decided to finally wake up."

That voice. Brennan stilled, taking deep breaths. At last he opened his eyes. "Eckhart." He rubbed the side of his neck where a sore spot itched with the last remnants of the tranq dart that took him out. A horrible thought struck, memories of an earlier capture. While trying to be unobtrusive about it, he shifted his hand a little further to the back of neck. His fingers stilled when they failed to find the little knob they searched for. Brennan was surprised to find they had not put in a subdermal governor. A sense of imminent triumph raced through his veins but he cautioned himself before he could act on it. Eckhart was no fool. If there were no subdermal governor, the man would have a reason. Brennan was sure it wasn't a mere oversight; he knew his opponent well enough to know it wasn't as simple as that.

"You're not going to try and electrocute me?" Eckhart asked, unfazed. "Smart move, Mr. Mulwray. You see, you're imprisoned behind a force field. Can't see it, can't feel it. But your electrical tricks won't work."

Brennan shifted his gaze away from Eckhart and surveyed the room.

A woman slumped in a straight-backed chair behind him. Her hands lay on the armrests, her wrists bruised from the metal bands that Brennan was quite familiar with. The bands were loose now, however, no longer keeping her imprisoned. A swollen stomach pressed against the cloth of her shirt.

"Ashley?"

She glanced up. Her blue eyes were dull and filled with -- with something he couldn't quite determine. He didn't like the look, though.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded, and a tear slipped from her eye. "I'm sorry."

Brennan frowned. "What for?"

"Mr. Mulwray." Eckhart pulled Brennan's attention back to himself. "Now that the happy family reunion is over, I will need your cooperation for some tests. Willingly, or unwillingly."

"What?" Brennan's frown deepened, drawing his brows down. "Listen, Eckhart. I don't know what you're talking about, but if you think you can--"

He faltered when Eckhart's lips split and he began to emit a strange barking noise. Brennan stared at him, for a long minute not comprehending. Then his brain processed the fact that Eckhart was laughing. Brennan had never thought the pale man capable of humor, let alone laughter. It wasn't a pleasant sound, however, and he failed to suppress the shiver that ran along his spine. Whatever it was that Eckhart found so funny, it couldn't be good news for him or Ashley.

"You don't know," Eckhart stated. His features settled back in the familiar scowl. "She never told you."

"Who never told me what?"

"I'd shake your hand," Eckhart said, "but..." He gestured at the invisible force field separating them. "I do have to congratulate you, Mr. Mulwray. According to our tests, Miss Elliott is about to make you a father."

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"What?" Brennan exclaimed. His eyes skittered sideways, glancing at Ashley's abdomen. "That's not possible! I never--"

Eckhart took an interested step closer, cocking his head a little sideways. "Never--what?" he prodded.

Brennan swallowed the rest of his words, his mind racing to process the latest information. "Never--nothing," he muttered. "I'm just shocked, that's all." He again looked at Ashley. Was it another scheme to get him to cooperate? Was Eckhart telling the truth? Ashley's face gave him no clue.

"Hmm." Eckhart stared hard at Brennan for a long time, impassive eyes boring into the mutant. When Brennan provided no further information he turned away. "I'll be back later. I'm sure you and Miss Elliott have a lot to discuss."

Brennan waited until the door had closed behind Eckhart. Then he whirled around, eyes flashing at Ashley. He needed her to say it out loud.

She took one look at him, and nodded.

"It's true," she admitted softly, staring at the floor. "You are the baby's father. When I absorbed you-- Well, apparently a tiny bit remained behind after your friends... extracted you."

In a flash, he understood. Nine months ago, she hijacked his power, and absorbed him completely. That's when it must have happened. Although Brennan had no idea how it could have. The good news was that, though Eckhart found out about Brennan's paternity before he did himself, the creep apparently didn't realize that he had a miraculous conception on his hands. And anything Eckhart didn't know couldn't hurt Brennan, or Ashley. Or their child, Brennan's mind added.

Brennan took a deep breath, suddenly finding his lungs needed more air. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged a gesture around the room. "Careful what you say."

"You're worried about bugs? Don't be." Ashley patted her stomach with a gentle hand. "Junior here will take care of it. He, or she, wreaks havoc with electronics."

"Right."

She gave him a wry smile. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to happen. I didn't mean for any of it to happen."

Brennan's expression softened. "Why didn't you contact me? Tell me?"

Ashley shrugged and shifted awkwardly, trying to find a more comfortable position in the hard chair. Brennan sat on the floor, crossing his legs in front of him. "After what I did--I thought you'd hate me," she said. "Besides, it's my problem. I didn't want to bother you."

"It's my baby too," Brennan chided her. He couldn't bring himself to be angry with her. Perhaps a little upset for not telling him, but not angry.

It was a unique situation. Brennan hadn't had any active part in the conception of this child. Still, he realized he already felt the genetic pull of his unborn offspring. It was like... He searched his brain for a comparison. The closest he could think of was the pull of lightning he sometimes felt when thunderstorms brewed. He wondered if it was a

mutant thing, or if ordinary fathers also felt such a connection with their children.

Brennan found he couldn't keep his eyes off Ashley's abdomen. "How much longer?"

"Not much." Ashley shifted again, grimacing.

Brennan jumped back to his feet, suddenly nervous. "We have to get out of here," he muttered, prodding the invisible shield that held him captive as securely as thick walls of concrete would have done. Better, even. At least concrete walls would have had a lock that he could either pick or blow up. "I don't want Eckhart to get hold of our child."

"The shield is too strong," Ashley replied wearily. "Don't you think I tried? I used all my power, and that of the baby. Couldn't even get it to flicker."

"Then we need help." Brennan lifted his ringed hand to his mouth, only to realize that between the force field and his child's disruptive power, he was effectively incommunicado as far as Mutant X was concerned.

"Damn it!"

oOo

"Adam?"

"I'm listening."

At the sound of Jesse's voice coming in over the com-link, Emma perked up from the chair she sat slumped in. Her head still hurt, although the headache was gradually fading until only a dull throb in her left temple remained. She had refused, however, to go lie down when Brennan, Jesse and Shalimar left by car to rescue Ashley from Eckhart's hands.

"Brennan's gone."

"What?" Adam glanced at Emma, concern marring his brow.

Emma walked over, a confused frown wrinkling her own forehead.

"Brennan's missing. Vanished. One minute he was there, the next he was gone. Found the car keys, though. He must have dropped them." Emma recognized a slight note of desperation in Jesse's tone; he sounded as if he hoped Adam would tell him Brennan was

right beside him, at the Sanctuary. He knew better, Emma knew.

"Do you think the GSA got him?"

"It certainly has their scent all over it," Shalimar growled, joining the conversation over a second link.

Adam pondered for a long second. Emma held her breath.

"I want you both back here," Adam said at last. "If the GSA is taking you out one by one, it's too dangerous. We need to reevaluate our tactics."

"No!" Emma cried. "Adam, they targeted Brennan for a reason. We have to get them out of there, both him and Ashley."

"Jesse, Shalimar, hold on." Adam turned to face Emma. "What do you know that you're not telling us? Emma, this is important."

"I know." She hesitated. "Brennan's the father of Ashley's baby," she said softly. "I sensed it. That's why I know exactly where she is. It's Brennan's... let's say essence, within the baby that I can hone in on. I'm sorry I didn't say anything before. Ashley made me promise not to tell."

"I see." Adam rubbed his face. "How-- Wait, because she absorbed him?"

Emma nodded.

"Shalimar, Jesse, lay low. Emma and I are on our way."

oOo

Nobody noticed when Adam suddenly appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the parking lot outside the Genomex complex. He looked around for a moment and raised his right hand to his face. He spoke a few words, softly.

Shalimar and Jesse materialized from the brush dividing the parking lot from the main road.

Shalimar smirked at Adam. "That's pretty freaky," she said with a nod to the invisible door he had stepped through.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Nope." Jesse shrugged. "Nothing happened. No sign of Brennan, nobody looking for us."

"We better get him and Ashley out of there stat. Shalimar, please lead the way?"

The blond grinned in anticipation. "Be happy too."

Jesse exchanged an amused look with Adam. There was nothing the feral liked better than a good brawl with some GS agents.

The doors slid easily aside upon their approach and they marched into the building. A security guard carrying a clipboard ran up to them.

"Hey! You can't just walk in here. You need to sign in f--Oomph." A jab to his stomach sent the air from his lungs. He bent forward in agony, and a raised knee connected with his chin. The man crumpled to the floor without any further sound. Shalimar looked slightly disappointed.

The man's shout, however, had alerted other guards patrolling the hallways. They came running, their boots pounding the concrete floor. Shalimar dashed ahead of Jesse and Adam, a flurry of kicks and jabs and high jumps. Gray-uniformed guards were flying every which way, arms and legs milling. Just as Jesse was about to complain that Shalimar should leave some for him, she ran up the wall, passed several open-mouthed men and landed behind them.

"That's better," Jesse muttered as the guards in front now turned their attention to him and Adam.

It was over in moments. Gray-clad figures lay sprawled along the length of the hallway. Jesse's cheek throbbed. One moment of inattention had given a security guard an opening, and the guy had dealt him a good blow.

"Now, let's get Brennan," Adam panted. He limped a little; a steel-tipped boot had connected with his knee.

"You and Jesse go," Shalimar suggested. She hadn't even broken a sweat. "I'll keep watch."

"All right." Adam pointed at the door farthest down the hallway. "Emma said they should be in there."

Jesse raced into the room, ready to pommel any security guard he might encounter.

There were none. He quickly took in the layout of the room. To the right, several computer terminals were lined up against the wall. Their screens were glowing with scrolling numbers, and the cooling fans hummed softly. Brennan and Ashley were on Jesse's left. Ashley sat on a chair and Brennan on the floor, his back resting against the wall. Jesse dashed in their direction.

"Hey, here's the caval--Ow!" He slammed into an invisible wall, which stopped his progress abruptly. Suddenly blocked in its advance, the energy of Jesse's forward motion translated itself into another direction, propelling him back with such force that he lost his balance and landed on his butt.

Brennan grinned. "If you hadn't been in such a hurry, I could have warned you. Glad to see you, though, Jess."

Jesse picked himself up from the floor, wincing. "That hurt!"

Adam followed Jesse into the room at a more moderate pace. He crossed to the bank of computers, and began studying the data scrolling across the screens. He whistled softly. "That's a pretty strong force field."

"Tell me about it," Jesse muttered.

Brennan's grin widened. "Needed to control a pretty special baby."

Jesse rubbed his behind but couldn't help himself smirking back at Brennan. "Spoken like a true daddy."

He was satisfied to see Brennan blink. "How did you know?"

"Emma." Jesse went to stand beside Adam. He peered past the other man's shoulder. "Can you take it down?"

"Sure." Adam pulled over a seat, settled himself, and started hitting keys on one of the keyboards. "Just give me a minute."

Assured that Adam knew what he was doing, Jesse turned back to the two new mutants incarcerated behind the invisible field. It was strange. To all appearances, they should be able to walk right up and out of the room. But the rather painful encounter with the force field had taught him that looks could be deceiving. Until Adam shut off the field, walking away wasn't an option.

Brennan was staring at Ashley. "Emma knew? You told Emma, but not me?"

Ashley shook her head. "I didn't tell her. She knew, almost as soon as we met, earlier. I made her promise not to tell until I could tell you myself." She smiled tiredly, but the smile faded as a shudder ran through her body and she whimpered in pain, clutching a hand around her belly. Jesse took a step forward, stopping short when the simmering field caused the hair on his arms to stand on end.

"Ashley?" Brennan's irritation was gone and he rushed to the girl's side. "Are you all right?"

"No," she gasped. "I'm having a baby."

"Yes, of course you are, but-- You mean, now?" The last word came out a little bit of a squeak, Jesse noted with absent amusement.

"Yes." Ashley took a deep breath and straightened. "Now."

"Adam!" Brennan pleaded with the older man. "*Now* would be a good time to shut down that damn force field."

"Right." Adam glanced over his shoulder and gave them an encouraging smile before he returned to pressing keys and entering commands. "Done."

Nothing changed in the room for a long second. Then Jesse sensed the field going down. The lights flickered; the computer screens blanked out one by one, streamers of smoke wafting up from burnt-out monitors. "I'd say it worked," Jesse remarked dryly. "That's one powerful mutant baby."

With Brennan on the right, arm slung around Ashley's waist, and her left hand draped across Jesse's shoulders, they helped her follow Adam out of the room. In the hallway, the uniformed guards he and Shalimar had strewn in motionless heaps across the floor were still out, Jesse noted with satisfaction. "Careful." He gestured for Ashley to step over a still form that blocked the doorway.

"Nice job," Brennan commented.

"Thank you." Shalimar appeared from the shadows. "All clear," she told Adam. "Guess the alarm system is on the fritz, too."

o0o

Shalimar was right. No sirens blared. No security guards or GS agents came running down the hallways to stop them. They encountered nobody while they hurriedly made their way across the Genomex compound. At last they passed through a pair of double doors, their automatic systems conveniently locked in the open position. The moment they cleared the doorway, the Double Helix appeared as if by magic in the parking lot, sparkling in the sunshine.

"We need to get Ashley to a hospital, Adam," Brennan urged.

"No! No hospital." Ashley fought down another contraction and she sounded a bit breathless. "Can't. Baby'll blow up all the machinery." She noticed the Helix. "And I can't go in that either!" Her voice began to take on a note of panic.

"Stay calm," Adam suggested. "Emma?"

"Yes, Adam?" Her voice came over the link.

"Can you come out here a moment and give us a hand?"

"Sure." An instant later the Double Helix opened its maw and Emma stepped out. She only needed one look at Ashley to realize what Adam wanted her to do. Her eyelids closed for a moment and when they opened again, they held an intense fire. Emma took Ashley's hand, staring hard at her. Slowly, Ashley's drawn features softened and her breathing eased a little.

"We should be all right now," Emma told Adam. "The baby's calmed down."

"You better stay near," Shalimar said while Adam ushered everyone inside the Double Helix. "Crashing now would be a very bad idea."

Emma laughed. "Isn't it always? Don't worry, Shal. I got it."
oOo

"Hello! We need some help here." Shalimar raced ahead, drawing everyone's attention. "Pregnant lady needs a doctor."

Brennan strode on Shalimar's heels, carrying a moaning Ashley in his arms. Emma struggled to keep up with Brennan's much larger strides. Adam and Jesse closed the line.

One of the emergency room nurses took one look at Ashley's belly and her pale, sweaty face, and gestured for Brennan to put the patient down on a stretcher.

"What's your name, honey?"

"Ashley," Ashley grunted. Her face twisted when another contraction hit her.

An aide approached at another wave of the nurse's hand and took hold of the gurney. "We'll take it from here," the nurse assured them. "Don't worry." She glanced at Brennan. "Are you the father?"

"Uhm... yeah. Yes, I am."

"Good. You come along. The others wait here. And I need someone to go to the desk and fill out the admission forms."

"I'll handle that," Adam said. He patted Brennan's shoulder. "You go ahead."

"I have to go too." Emma wormed her way in between the nurse, the aide and Brennan. Ashley reached for her, grabbing her hand. She squeezed it tight.

"Miss, you can't--"

"She comes with us," Ashley growled before growing rigid and letting out a loud moan through clamped teeth.

The nurse took a long look at Emma, then shrugged. "Okay."

She pressed the button to call for the elevator and as soon as it arrived, the aide wheeled the stretcher in. "Call O and G," the nurse ordered as the doors closed. "Tell them we need a labor cubicle prepped right away."

The maternity wing presented an oasis of peace after the hectic emergency room. A male doctor was waiting for them at the elevator, alerted to their arrival by the ER staff. "In here," he ordered, pointing his finger at a wide door.

While nurses and the doctor bustled about, Emma drew over a stool and sat down beside Ashley. She made sure she wasn't in anyone's way, all the while holding the other woman's hand in hers. Brennan began pacing at the foot of the bed but withdrew to the far corner after another long, pain-filled cry wrenched from Ashley's throat.

The doctor took his position near the foot of the bed. "You're doing great, Ashley. It's almost over."

Emma glanced at Brennan, giggling at the paleness of his skin and the consternation etched in his features. "Bren? You all right?" She knew she was being unfair but couldn't help feel a twinge of malicious pleasure at the sight of such a manly man frightened half out of wits when faced with the prospect of having to watch a woman give birth.

He met her eyes, looking wild. "Not... really."

Emma's momentary amusement faded. "Maybe you should wait outside," she suggested. "I can handle two, but I can't handle three." She knew it was safe to say such a thing. The nurses and doctor were far too busy to pay them any attention, and besides, they would have no clue what she was talking about.

"Uhm... yeah." Brennan fled into the hallway.

Emma returned her attention to the woman in the bed, and the baby in her belly, preparing itself to be born and to greet the world. Ashley was calmer now that she was in good hands and Emma soothed the baby's fears so it wouldn't destroy the medical equipment. The baby, although agitated and frightened at having to leave the safety of its mother's womb, allowed itself to be placated. And so everyone could concentrate on the business at hand: the small miracle of helping a new life into the world.

oOo

Brennan paced the hallway outside the room. Three steps up, turn, three steps down, turn, three steps up. He never strayed far from the room in which Ashley labored, his ears tuned to the slightest noise coming through the door. The sounds didn't tell him much; all he could discern were the encouraging murmurs of the doctor and nurses, broken by an occasional pained cry from Ashley.

It was quiet in the maternity wing. Peaceful. Every once in a while, a nurse walked by, sometimes cradling a mewling bundle wrapped in a blanket. Several cubicles further down the hallway, another man mimicked Brennan's pacing. Back and forth, forth and back. *Another expectant father*, a part of Brennan's mind whispered evilly.

He wondered what he was supposed to do. He felt numb. Rationally, he was aware that the news had not quite sunk in yet. But damn, he was going to be a father! Thoughts kept whirling in his head; about the baby, Ashley, what was expected from him, what he wanted himself.

Concerned, he wondered if Ashley would expect him to marry her. *No*, he decided after some long minutes of agonized contemplating. If that were the case, she would have

come to him sooner. In fact, if the baby hadn't caused her such trouble in the hospital the first time she tried to get help, she might not have come at all. And he would have never known.

That prospect horrified Brennan almost as much as the idea of marriage. He had never thought much about raising a family before. First, because he was too busy surviving as a crook. Then, the life style of a Mutant X team member didn't quite agree with family life either. But now, now that becoming a father was a matter of minutes --how many hours had passed since Ashley disappeared into that room anyway?-- he found himself strangely excited at having participated in creating a new life. *Although*, he mused, *I haven't really done anything!*

One thing was for sure: even if he couldn't be held responsible for this child's existence, it was his. It carried his genes as well as Ashley's. And he would be damned if he'd let a child of his grow up the way he had himself: fatherless; never knowing who his dad was, or what he was like.

Taking another turn, Brennan made a decision. He wanted to be a part of this child's life. He wouldn't desert it, like his old man had done to him. He would be there for his baby and for its mother if she needed him. They would find a workable arrangement.

Feeling better once his mind was made up, he began to worry what was taking them so long. Was everything going all right in that room? Sometimes, he longed to possess Emma's power. What he wouldn't give to be able to scan Ashley's or the doctor's mind to find out what was going on. He dreaded going back inside, afraid of what he would find.

He stopped his pacing, standing in front of the door, wondering what to do. Go in? Put his ear against the door? He wished someone were here with him, Shalimar or Adam. Or even Jesse, whose jokes might have distracted him.

Brennan was spared having to make a decision. The door inched open and one of the neonatal nurses peered out. Behind her, he could make out shadows moving. And--

A thin yet powerful wail rose from the room. Brennan's eyes widened. Was that--?

"Congratulations, Mr...."

"Mulwray," he replied absently, trying to peer past the nurse.

"Mr. Mulwray. You have a daughter. Why don't you come say hello to her?"

oOo

As soon as the doctor gave the okay, the team whisked Ashley and the newborn baby away to the Sanctuary. It was safe to assume that Mason Eckhart and his GSA were still very interested in getting their hands on the child, and every minute in the hospital the new mutants were at risk of discovery, with all the nasty consequences.

The flight to Stormking Mountain didn't last long. As soon as they arrived, Ashley was escorted to one of the guestrooms, where she could rest and recover. Emma never strayed far from her and the baby's side, although the little girl was much calmer now that she had managed to make her way into the world.

"What am I going to do with her when you're no longer around?" Ashley asked Emma, casting an adoring and worried glance down at the little girl in her arms. "She's gonna wreck everything."

"We'll implant her with this."

"What's that?" Brennan tore himself away from his new pastime of gazing at his daughter to see Adam holding a shiny, silver disc the size of a dime in his fingers.

"Subdermal governor," Adam explained. "That will suppress her gift until she's old enough to learn to control it."

"Subdermal governor? Are you insane? No!" Brennan firmly positioned himself between Adam, and the woman and child on the bed. "You're not giving my daughter one of those things!" He folded his arms and squared his shoulders.

Adam smiled his special smile, the smile that said he knew something you didn't. "Brennan, this is a moderated version. It's not harmful to her in any way, it doesn't hurt. It will just make sure she can't use her powers until she grows up a little. It'll dissolve by itself over time as she slowly learns to control her abilities."

Brennan grunted. He looked hard at Adam, unwavering, until he finally stepped aside to let Adam near his daughter.

"Have you thought of a name?" Brennan asked Ashley ten minutes later, once everyone else had filed out of the room and they were alone.

"I thought you might want to decide." She brushed a finger along the baby's cheek. A tiny muscle in the child's face twitched but she never woke. "Do you?" She peered up at Brennan.

He met her eyes. "Alice," he said. "After my mother."

Ashley smiled. "Then Alice it is."

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