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Merry Christmas

X-MEN™



...GUESS WHAT JUST CAME DOWN THE CHIMNEY!

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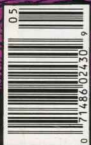
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AUTHORITY

X-MEN

CLASSIC



Gifts
Lighter

Cyclops. Storm. Nightcrawler. Wolverine. Colossus. Children of the atom, students of Charles Xavier, MUTANTS — feared and hated by the world they have sworn to protect. These are the STRANGEST heroes of all!

Stan Lee
PRESENTS:

THE UNCANNY X-MEN!™

HER NAME IS STORM, AND ALTHOUGH IN HER YOUNG LIFE SHE HAS BEEN HAILED AS A GODDESS, SHE IS IN TRUTH A MUTANT-- MISTRESS OF THE WIND AND WEATHER AND NOW A MEMBER OF THE UNCANNY X-MEN, A TEAM OF MUTANT SUPER-HEROES.

ARRGHH!

THIS AUTUMN NIGHT, IN THE SKY ABOVE NEW YORK'S WESTCHESTER COUNTY, SHE HAS COME FACE TO FACE WITH BEINGS AS FOUL AS THE PIT THAT SPAWNED THEM--

-- MEMBERS OF AN ANCIENT RACE THAT ONCE RULED THE EARTH AND WHO MEAN TO RULE IT AGAIN.

THEY ARE THE N'GARAI-- THE ELDER GODS OF LEGEND, THE ULTIMATE EVIL... ONE OF THEIR NUMBER HAS ATTACKED THE X-MEN IN THE MANSION THAT SERVES AS THE MUTANTS' SECRET HEADQUARTERS.



I... CAN'T LET THESE MONSTERS HIT ME AGAIN. NEVER FELT... SUCH AGONY.

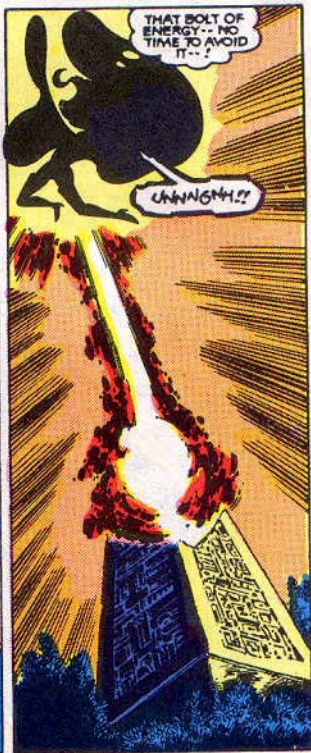
BELOW STORM IS AN AGES-OLD CAIRN, WHOSE MALEFIC POWER SUSTAINS THE CREATURE THAT THREATENS HER FRIENDS.

UNLESS SHE DESTROYS IT UTTERLY, THE X-MEN ARE DOOMED.

BUT WHAT ARE THESE CREATURES? THEY AREN'T REAL!



THEY'RE JUST THINGS OF SMOKE AND LIGHT, CREATED BY THE CAIRN. HOW CAN I FIGHT THEM?!



THAT BOLT OF ENERGY-- NO TIME TO AVOID IT--!

UNNNNNH!!

SHAKEN TO HER SOUL BY HER NARROW ESCAPE, STORM SOARS WEARILY HOME*...



*FOR DETAILS, SEE X-MEN #96 -- LOUISE.

AS PROFESSOR XAVIER-- THE X-MEN'S FOUNDER AND MENTOR-- TELEPATHICALLY ASSURES HER THAT THE BATTLE IS OVER, THE VICTORY WON.



MONTHS PASS, AND NATURE BEGINS TO HEAL THE TERRIBLE WOUNDS INFLICTED BY THAT BRIEF, FIERCE COMBAT.



THE X-MEN MOVE ON TO NEW CHALLENGES, NEW FOES. THEY KNOW TRIUMPH, AND TRAGEDY.



MY MIND... FUZZY... NOTHING FITS TOGETHER... I CAN'T... CONCENTRATE...

GODDESS-- NO! I'M BEING PULLED INTO THE CAIRN-- INTO THE DARK! AND NO MATTER HOW HARD I TRY, I CAN'T BREAK LOOSE! BUT I MUST!

I MUST BE FREE!

AND I SHALL BE FREE!

IT'S AS IF THE SUN HAD MOMENTARILY TOUCHED THE EARTH. RAW ENERGY-- FUELED IN PART BY STORM'S CLAUSTROPHOBIC FEAR OF BEING BURIED ALIVE, IN PART BY AN ATASTIC TERROR BORN OF SUB-CONSCIOUS RACIAL MEMORIES OF THE N'GARAI-- EXPLODES AROUND HER...

... SHATTERING THE CAIRN. AT THE SAME INSTANT, THE THING SPAWNED BY THAT CAIRN SIMPLY... CEASES TO EXIST.

AND, IN TIME, THEIR BATTLE WITH N'GARAI-- ONE OF THE FIRST THE "NEW" X-MEN FOUGHT-- IS FORGOTTEN

FORGOTTEN IT MAY BE-- BY THE X-MEN BUT IT IS FAR FROM OVER.

PROFESSOR XAVIER BELIEVED THAT DESTROYING THE CAIRN WOULD FOREVER SEAL THIS GATEWAY BETWEEN THE N'GARAI DIMENSION AND EARTH.

HE WAS WRONG.



DOUGLAS, YOU ARE A HOPELESS ROMANTIC!

SO SUE ME!

ELLIE, IT'S OUR FIRST CHRISTMAS. WE'LL HAVE YEARS AND YEARS TO GET PRE-CHOPPED TREES OR PLASTIC ONES.



I WANT THIS ONE TO BE SPECIAL.

I WASN'T ARGUING, DOUG. JUST STATING A FACT.

HOW'S THIS?

WELL...LL...

WE LIVE IN AN APARTMENT, REMEMBER?

SAVE THE BIG ONE FOR OUR FIRST HOUSE.

I THINK IT'S SWEET.

I THINK YOU'RE SWEET.



I THINK... VERY NAUGHTY THOUGHTS.

OH, YEAH? LIKE...

...WHAT'S THAT?!



SOMETHING IN THE TREES.

I'LL TAKE A LOOK.

DOUG, BE CAREFUL!



RELAX, ELLIE. IT'S A FALSE ALARM, I THINK.

I'M GLAD THE MOON IS FULL. THINGS ARE LIT UP SO BRIGHT I DON'T NEED MY FLASH--



WURRRGH!

FOR DOUGLAS MOORE, DEATH IS VIRTUALLY INSTANTANEOUS.

HIS WIFE HAS TIME FOR A CHOKED CRY...



... THAT IS ENDED AS QUICKLY, AS ABRUPTLY, AS HER LIFE.

AND WHEN THE KILLING IS DONE, THE N'GARAI FEEDS...

... ON BOTH BODY AND SOUL.



THESE VICTIMS ARE BUT THE FIRST... OF MANY.

IT WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS, AND ALL THROUGH THE HOUSE, THE X-MEN ARE STIRRING.

IT'S BEEN A QUIET MONTH SINCE THEIR BATTLE IN WASHINGTON, D.C., WITH THE NEW BROTHERHOOD OF EVIL MUTANTS* -- AND THEY'VE SPENT THE TIME CATCHING THEIR BREATH, HONING OLD SKILLS, LEARNING NEW ONES.

NO DAY, NO OPPORTUNITY, IS WASTED, WHICH IS WHY, EVEN ON CHRISTMAS EVE, KITTY PRYDE -- THE NEWEST AND YOUNGEST MEMBER OF THE TEAM -- MUST SPEND AN HOUR UNDER PROFESSOR XAVIER'S INSTRUCTION (IN ADDITION TO HER SCHOOLWORK) LEARNING ALL THERE IS TO KNOW ABOUT THE X-MEN, THEIR ABILITIES, THEIR EQUIPMENT.

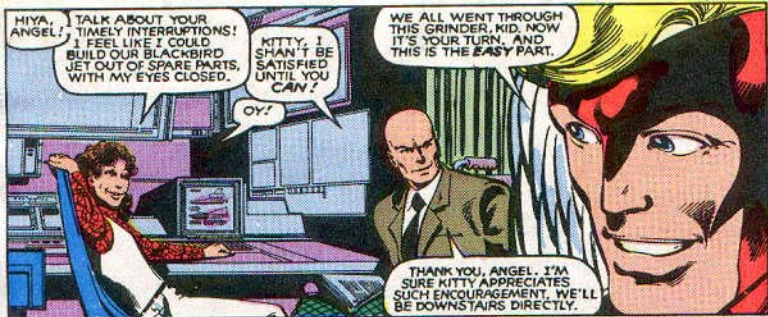
ONCE MORE, KITTY. "BLACKBIRD" IGNITION PROCEDURE, FROM THE BEGINNING.

Sigh.

MASTER SWITCH, ON. BRAKES, LOCKED. THROTTLES TO...

PROFESSOR, THE CAR IS READY. IT'S, ah, GETTING LATE.

*LAST ISH -- I.



HIYA, ANGEL! TALK ABOUT YOUR TIMELY INTERRUPTIONS! I FEEL LIKE I COULD JET OUR BLACKBIRD JET OUT OF SPARE PARTS, WITH MY EYES CLOSED.

KITTY, I SHAN'T BE SATISFIED UNTIL YOU CAN!

OY!

WE ALL WENT THROUGH THIS GRINDER, KID. NOW IT'S YOUR TURN, AND THIS IS THE EASY PART.

THANK YOU, ANGEL. I'M SURE KITTY APPRECIATES SUCH ENCOURAGEMENT. WE'LL BE DOWNSTAIRS DIRECTLY.

SOON, IN THE MANSION'S FOYER...

PROF. I'D LIKE TO INTRODUCE MY, um, LADY, CHARLES XAVIER--
MARIKO YASHIDA.

KOM-BAN-WA, KYOJU. HAJIMEMASHITE.

GOOD EVENING, PROFESSOR. I AM PLEASED TO MEET YOU.



AS AM I, MISS YASHIDA.

MARIKO!

LONG TIME, NO SEE! AND YOU LOOK AS BEAUTIFUL AS EVER!



Eh--?! NIGHTCRAWLER-SAN!

BACK OFF, ELF!

WHADDYA THINK YER DOIN'? MARIKO'S MY LADY!



RETRACTABLE ADAMANTIUM CLAWS FLASH FROM THE BACKS OF WOLVERINE'S HANDS, AND ONLY NIGHTCRAWLER'S ABILITY TO TELEPORT SAVES HIM FROM SOME NASTY WOUNDS.

INSTANTLY REACTING WITH A SPEED THAT BELIES HIS MASSIVE FORM, PETER RASPUTIN SHIFTS TO THE ARMORED FORM OF COLOSSUS, AND...



LEGGO'AME, YA TIN-PLATED-LUMMOX!

WOLVERINE, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?! KURT IS OUR FRIEND!

WOLVERINE, SHEATH YOUR CLAWS!

KURT MEANT NO HARM. YOU KNOW THAT. HIS WAS AN INNOCENT CHRISTMAS GREETING...



...NOT SOME ENEMY'S ATTACK!



GREAT. THE KID HERE MAY HAVE A GENIUS I.Q. BUT SHE'S ABOUT AS QUICK ON THE UPTAKE AS A CLAM.



I'VE NEVER SPENT CHANUKAH AWAY FROM HOME BEFORE. I WONDER HOW MOM AND DAD ARE DOING?

I KNOW! I'LL CALL THEM!



IT'S FUNNY. SOMETIMES, I DON'T MISS 'EM AT ALL.

SOMETIMES I DO.



NO ANSWER.

BRING THE PHONE--!

OH, IT'S YOU. SORRY. HI, SCOTT.



THIS IS KITTY PRYDE. DO YOU REMEMBER--?

ON THE OTHER END OF THE LINE, IN THE FLORIDA SEACOAST TOWN OF SHARK BAY, IS SCOTT SUMMERS. AS CYCLOPS, HE ONCE LED THE X-MEN-- UNTIL THE DEATH OF THE WOMAN HE LOVED, JEAN GREY. AFTER THAT-- DRIVEN BY NEEDS HE BARELY UNDERSTOOD AND A GRIEF ALMOST TOO TERRIBLE TO ENDURE-- HE TOOK A LEAVE OF ABSENCE FROM THE TEAM. * HE'S BEEN ON THE ROAD EVER SINCE.



OF COURSE I REMEMBER YOU, KITTY. HOW'RE THINGS?

NO ONE'S HOME BUT YOU? I... SEE.

WELL, GIVE EVERYONE MY LOVE, WISH THEM A MERRY CHRISTMAS AND TELL THEM I'LL TRY TO PHONE AGAIN TOMORROW.

'BYE, KITTY. TAKE CARE.



*IN X-MEN #138--L.

POOR KID. SHE SOUNDED REALLY LONELY. I KNOW THE FEELING. I HAD TOO MANY CHRISTMASSES LIKE THAT GROWING UP IN THE ORPHANAGE.



EATS

WHY'D THE OTHERS LEAVE HER, THOUGH? THAT'S NOT LIKE THE X-MEN AT ALL.

EXCUSE ME! I'M LOOKING FOR LEE FORRESTER-- CAPTAIN OF THE ARCADIA. I WAS TOLD HE WAS HIRING CREW.



I'M LEE FORRESTER-- 'ALETTYS' TO MY RELATIVES-- AND YOU HEARD RIGHT.

YOU'RE A GIRL--!

CARE TO TRY AGAIN, SPORT?

I... I'M SORRY. I MEAN, I...

APOLOGY ACCEPTED...

SCOTT. SCOTT SUMMERS.

C'MON ABOARD, SCOTT. WE'LL SPLIT A POT OF COFFEE AND TALK.

ENOUGH WITH THE MOPES, A'READY!

I'M A BIG GIRL NOW, AND WHEN BIG GIRLS-- WHO ALSO HAPPEN TO BE X-MEN-- FEEL AS MISERABLE AS I DO, THEY DON'T ACT SORRY FOR THEMSELVES AND GET ALL WEEPY-WAILY.

THEY HIT SOME-THING. PRIMITIVE-- BUT OH SO CATHARTIC.

SINCE NO ONE'S AROUND TO MONITOR ME IN THE DANGER ROOM, I CAN'T RUN A COMBAT WORKOUT.

BUT I DON'T REALLY MIND.

SHE CONCENTRATES, TRYING TO BE SERIOUS BUT UNABLE TO REPRESS A GIGGLE OF EXCITEMENT AS SHE PHASES THROUGH THE FLOOR OF THE CONTROL BOOTH--

-- LITERALLY FALLING THROUGH THE VAST EMPTY SPACES BETWEEN ATOMS, THOSE OF HER BODY SLIDING BETWEEN THOSE OF THE METAL--

-- AND FLOATS DOWN TO THE FLOOR OF THE DANGER ROOM. SHE HASN'T BEEN AN X-MAN VERY LONG. SHE'S NOT USED TO HER NASCENT SUPER-POWERS, AND USING THEM STILL GIVES HER A THRILL.

AWAITING HER IS ENOUGH EQUIPMENT TO STOCK A TOP-RATED SPA. AFTER A SERIES OF WARM-UP EXERCISES, KITTY GOES TO WORK.

ONCE UPON A TIME -- TWO, THREE, FOUR-- I THOUGHT THE LIFE OF A SUPER-HERO WAS ALL FUN AND GAMES.

HAH!

NO ONE TOLD ME I'D BE SPENDING AN HOUR A DAY-- PLUS SCHOOLWORK -- STUDYING.

OR ANOTHER HOUR, EVERY DAY, EXERCISING, AND THIS ISN'T JUST FOR ME, EITHER. ALL THE X-MEN WORK OUT. I DON'T SEE THE POINT. IT'S OUR SUPER-POWERS THAT NEED TRAININ', NOT OUR BODIES. I'M IN GREAT SHAPE.

THE WAY THINGS ARE GOING, I'LL PROBABLY TURN INTO A TEEN-AGE, FEMALE ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER.

ALLEZ-OOP!

OW!

BETTER EASE OFF A LITTLE. SOMETHING WENT TWINGE IN MY THIGH.

I SHOULDN'T JOKE SO MUCH ABOUT THE X-MEN. THIS ISN'T A GAME TO THEM. THEY HIDE THEIR FEELINGS AROUND ME, BUT WHENEVER THEY MENTION JEAN GREY, THEY SOUND SO... SAD.

SHE DIED. AS AN X-MAN.

I COULD DIE.

I WISH I'D KNOWN HER BETTER -- MUMM?!

BRRRANG!

THAT'S THE BURGLAR ALARM! THE HOUSE COMPUTER SHOULD BE PRINTING OUT THE DETAILS ON THE WALL SCANSCREEN -- AH, THERE IT IS!

POSSIBLE INTRUDER ZONE 4

ZONE 4 IS UPSTAIRS... ORORO'S ATTIC!

IF THERE'S AN INTRUDER WHEN I'M BY MYSELF, I'M SUPPOSED TO CALL THE POLICE, BUT I THINK I'D BETTER CHECK THINGS OUT FIRST.

I CALLED 'EM LAST SEPTEMBER DURING A BIG WINDSTORM...

... AND IT TURNED OUT TO BE A FALSE ALARM. A TREE BRANCH HAD BLOWN THROUGH THE SKYLIGHT, THE COPS TOOK IT IN STRIDE BUT I FELT LIKE A JERK.

THIS TIME I'M GOING TO MAKE SURE!

RUNNING UP AIR MOLECULES IS A LOT MORE FUN THAN WALKING UP STAIRS!

EVEN IF I DO FIND A BURGLAR, THERE'S NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT. WITH MY PHASING POWER, THERE'S NO WAY I CAN BE HARMED.

GEE -- IT'S GOTTEN AWFUL COLD ALL OF A SUDDEN.

AND NO WONDER! MY COSTUME'S INSULATED, AND I CAN STILL FEEL THE COLD. KICKE CITY.

OH, NO! ORORO'S FLOWERS!

THEY'RE ALL DEAD, POOR THINGS, BUT -- THIS ISN'T RIGHT, GRANTED, THIS ATTIC WAS LIKE A HOthouse AND THE WINTER AIR OUTSIDE WILL KILL THE PLANTS BUT... NOT SO QUICKLY, SO COMPLETELY!

YUCK!

WHAT THE HECK IS THIS?!

THE FLOOR'S COVERED WITH THIS GOOP!

THAT SOUND --! SOMEONE'S IN HERE! BUT WHO --?!

NOT "WHO", KITTY-- WHAT!

NO!



THE DEMON LUNGES, EAGER TO CLAIM THIS NEW, SUCCULENT PREY...

... HOPING IT WILL SHIELD HER FROM HER UNHUMAN PURSUER.



... BUT KITTY IS TOO FAST FOR IT. SHE PHASES THROUGH THE FLOOR...

SHE HOPES IN VAIN.



CRIPES, THAT THING IS AS STRONG AS IT IS UGLY. AND ITS CLAWS ARE AS RAZOR-SHARP AS WOLVERINE'S!



I DON'T WANT TO THINK ABOUT WHY. BUT WHERE DID IT COME FROM?! WHAT THE BLAZES IS IT?!

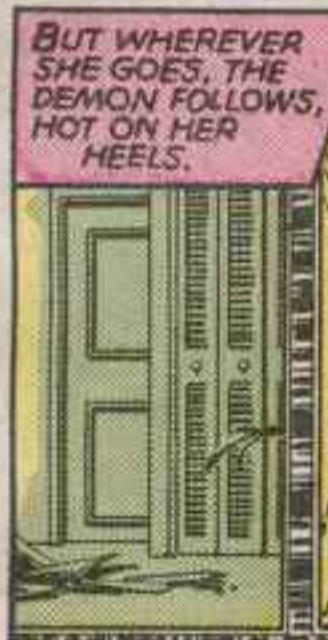
WHAT'S IT DOING HERE?!

IT'S OBVIOUS WHAT IT'S AFTER... ME!



IT'S DETERMINED, I'LL GIVE IT THAT. THE MANSION'S WALLS ARE SPECIALLY REINFORCED AND THEY DON'T EVEN SLOW IT DOWN.

SHE RUNS.



BUT WHEREVER SHE GOES, THE DEMON FOLLOWS, HOT ON HER HEELS.



I CAN'T KEEP THIS UP FOREVER. THAT THING'LL TRASH THE ENTIRE HOUSE. I CAN'T RUN FOR HELP, EITHER. IT COULD GET AWAY OR, WORSE, WAIT FOR THE POLICE TO SHOW UP AND THEN TEAR THEM APART.



FIGHTING IT WON'T BE EASY, THOUGH. PHYSICALLY, I'M HOPELESSLY OUTMATCHED.



BUT I HAVE A BRAIN. PERHAPS I CAN OUTWIT IT.

I NEED TO LEARN HOW SMART THAT THING IS. I'VE PULLED A LITTLE BIT AHEAD OF IT.

I'LL DUCK DOWN THIS STAIRWAY AND THEN, WHILE I'M MOMENTARILY OUT OF SIGHT...



...PHASE THROUGH THE STAIRS INTO THE STORAGE CLOSET UNDERNEATH. MY SCENT WILL SIMPLY DISAPPEAR IN MID-AIR. EVEN WOLVERINE'S SUPER-SENSITIVE NOSE WOULD HAVE A HARD TIME PICKING ME OUT OF ALL THE OTHER ODORS IN HERE.

THE MONSTER WILL HAVE TO DEDUCE WHAT I'VE DONE. THE QUESTION IS: CAN IT DO THAT?

I CAN'T HEAR ANYTHING. MY PLOY WORKED. NEXT I'LL PHASE THROUGH THE FLOOR INTO THE CLOSET BELOW--THE ONE THAT'S NEXT TO THE PHONE!

IF THIS WAS A MOVIE, THE MONSTER WOULD BE WAITING RIGHT OUTSIDE THE DOOR, READY TO BITE MY HEAD OFF THE MOMENT I SHOW MYSELF.

I DON'T BELIEVE I'M TAKING THIS SO MUCH IN STRIDE. I'M SCARED, YET... I'M COPING.

I'M OUT, AND SO FAR, I'M SAFE. ALL I NEED ARE A FEW SECONDS' GRACE, TO CALL THE PROFESSOR ON THE ROLLS' CAR-PHONE AND I FIGURE I'M HOME FREE.

ISN'T THAT A CHEERY THOUGHT? WELL, HERE GOES NOTHIN'!

X-MEN TO THE RESCUE. BYE-BYE BEASTIE.



THE DEMON TIMES ITS ATTACK PERFECTLY, SMASHING THROUGH THE DOOR BEHIND HER, BEFORE SPARTE CAN MOVE, MUCH LESS ESCAPE...

...ITS CLAWS RIP THROUGH HER, SHE SCREAMS--



-- BUT DOES NOT DIE.

I-- FELT THAT! I... MANAGED TO PHASE THE INSTANT BEFORE IT HIT ME, BUT ITS ATTACK STILL HURT. HURT--MAH! I'VE... NEVER FELT SUCH AGONY.



MY RIGHT ARM'S NUMB, FROZEN-- USELESS!

SOMEHOW, THAT CREATURE CAN REACH ME-- HURT ME-- EVEN IN MY EPHEMERAL STATE. THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING.

MY GUTS FEEL LIKE THEY'VE BEEN TWISTED INSIDE-OUT. I FEEL SICK-- PHYSICALLY AND PSYCHICALLY. IT'S AN EFFORT JUST TO STAY ON MY FEET.

I CAN'T LET IT TOUCH ME AGAIN.

IT'S *SMART*, TOO. IT ANTICIPATED MY MOVE AND TURNED THE TABLES ON ME. I DAREN'T UNDER-ESTIMATE IT A SECOND TIME.

I CAN'T CALL FOR HELP. I CAN'T RUN. I'VE NO ALTERNATIVE.

I HAVE TO FIGHT IT--AND BEAT IT-- ON MY OWN.

I'LL MAKE MY STAND HERE IN THE *DANGER ROOM*. MY TRAIL WILL LEAD IT INSIDE.

ONCE MORE USING HER PHASING ABILITY TO LITERALLY WALK ON INDIVIDUAL MOLECULES OF AIR, KITTY ASCENDS FROM THE FLOOR TO THE CONTROL BOOTH.

I'LL PROGRAM THE MOST DANGEROUS SEQUENCES POSSIBLE-- BLAST! I'M NOT USED TO DOING THIS ONE-HANDED. THIS IS HARDER THAN I THOUGHT. IT'S TAKING SO LONG-- TOO LONG.

THE SYSTEM HAS BUILT-IN SAFETY INTERLOCKS, TO PREVENT ANYONE FROM BEING SERIOUSLY INJURED. BUT IF I HIT THE MONSTER OFTEN ENOUGH, WITH EVERYTHING THE ROOM HAS, I THINK I CAN KNOCK IT SILLY!

AT THE VERY LEAST, THIS SHOULD KEEP IT OCCUPIED LONG ENOUGH FOR ME TO CONTACT THE PROFESSOR.

THERE. IT'S ALL SET. THE ONLY THING MISSING IS MY MONSTER. THAT SUCKER'S SURE TAKING ITS TIME.

Oh. SUPPOSE IT SUSPECTS A TRAP? THAT'S RIDICULOUS. THERE'S NO REASON WHY IT SHOULD. WHEN LAST IT SAW ME, I WAS CRIPPLED AND ON THE RUN.

UNLESS... IT ISN'T MERELY SMART, IT'S *REAL* SMART.

I THINK I JUST GOT MY ANSWER.

CRASH!

KITTY DIVES BACKWARDS, PHASING THROUGH THE FACE OF THE BOOTH.

THE DEMON CHARGES AFTER HER...

... SHATTERING THE ARMORED, SUPPOSEDLY UNBREAKABLE GLASS WITH TERRIFYING EASE, LEAVING SHATTERED, SAVAGED COMPUTERS SHORT-CIRCUITING IN ITS WAKE.

AS KITTY LANDS, SHE FEELS THE ROOM COME TO LIFE AROUND HER.



THE DEMON CLOSES IN FOR THE KILL, BELIEVING IT HAS HER CORNERED...

...AND THEN IT'S THE N'GARAI'S TURN TO YOWL IN SURPRISE AND PAIN AS THE TRAP SO CAREFULLY LAID BY KITTY...



...IT'S SPRUNG!

NAILED THE CREEP!

BUT, ALTHOUGH STAGGERED BY THE MULTIPLE ASSAULTS, THE DEMON IS FAR FROM BEATEN.



IT'S RIPPING UP THE FLOOR!

BAD MOVE, UGLY. REACTING THAT WAY IS SURE TO THROW THE DANGER ROOM SYSTEMS OUT OF CONTROL AND CANCEL THE SAFETY INTERLOCKS.

UNFORTUNATELY, WHEN THE DEVICES IN HERE RUN WILD, THEY CAN NOT ONLY KILL YOU...

...THEY CAN KILL ME, AS WELL.



MY PHASING ABILITY WILL PROTECT ME FROM THE MECHANICAL THREATS. I'LL SIMPLY SLIP RIGHT THROUGH 'EM. I'LL BE LESS ABLE TO HANDLE GAS OR SONIC ATTACKS, OR THE HALLUCINOGENIC LIGHTSHOWS.

AND, AT THE SAME TIME, I'VE GOT TO STAY AWAY FROM THE CREATURE. I DIDN'T EXPECT TO BE HERE WITH IT WHEN THE ROOM ACTIVATED. I THOUGHT I'D BE WATCHING FROM THE SAFETY OF THE BOOTH.

BUT PERHAPS I CAN TURN THAT TO MY ADVANTAGE. THE MONSTER SEEMS PREPARED TO ENDURE ANYTHING TO GET ME. I CAN LEAD IT INTO THE WORST OF THE ASSAULT SYSTEMS.

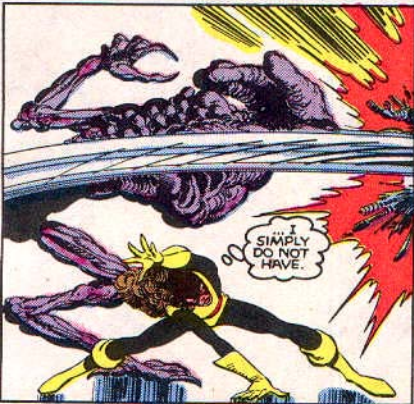
THEY SHOULDN'T AFFECT ME. BUT THEY OUGHT TO CAUSE MY MONSTER A WHOLE LOT OF PROBLEMS. FATAL ONES, I HOPE.

WHUNFFF! E

I WAS SAYING--!

A FORCE FIELD WALL! IT'S A RANDOM ENERGY PATTERN. IT'LL TAKE CONCENTRATION TO PHASE THROUGH IT...

...AND THAT KIND OF TIME...



I SIMPLY DO NOT HAVE.

DON'T THIS WALKING HORROR EVER SLOW UP?! I'M PUSHING MYSELF AS HARD AS I CAN, AND I'M BARELY STAYING AHEAD OF IT.

THE MONSTER'S GETTING MAD-- AND I'M GETTING TIRED.

I ONLY NEED A COUPLE OF MINUTES-- TO GET MY SECOND WIND-- BUT I DOUBT I'M GONNA GET 'EM. MY INITIAL ADRENALIN HIGH IS STARTING TO WEAR OFF. I'M SLOWING DOWN.

NOW, I UNDERSTAND ABOUT THOSE DARN EXERCISES. TO SURVIVE THE KINDS OF FOES THE X-MEN FIGHT, YOU HAVE TO BE BETTER THAN THE BEST. SUPER-POWERS ALONE AREN'T ALWAYS ENOUGH TO DO THE TRICK. THEY HAVE TO BE COUPLED WITH A STRONG, WELL-HONED BODY AND MIND.

I DON'T BELIEVE IT. THIS MONSTER'S **WRECKED** THE DANGER ROOM. BUT WAS IT HURT IN THE PROCESS?! I DON'T KNOW. IT'S SO HARD TO TELL. THE MONSTER'S SCREAMING. BUT IS THAT PAIN OR RAGE? OR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT?!

IT'S STILL AFTER ME. AS EAGERLY AS EVER.

I CAN'T SLACKEN MY PACE-- NOT YET-- NO MATTER HOW MUCH I WANT TO. I'VE COME TOO FAR-- FOUGHT TOO HARD-- TO GIVE UP NOW. OR LOSE.

I'VE MADE MY LAST MISTAKE, TOO.

"DEAD."

NOT THE SORT OF THING YOUR TYPICAL HEALTHY THIRTEEN YEAR OLD IS SUPPOSED TO THINK ABOUT. I DON'T WANT TO DIE.

I CAN'T AFFORD ANOTHER. I'VE NO MORE MARGIN FOR ERROR. IF I FOUL UP AGAIN-- IF I GUESS WRONG-- I'M DEAD.

THAT'S SCARY. BUT WHAT'S MORE SCARY IS THE THOUGHT THAT IF THAT THING KILLS ME, THERE'LL BE NO ONE TO WARN THE X-MEN OF THE MONSTER'S EXISTENCE. IT'LL CATCH THEM OFF-GUARD WHEN THEY RETURN HOME. THEY'LL BE SLAUGHTERED!

IN THE DANGER ROOM, IT ALMOST CAUGHT ME, BUT FIRE FORCED IT AWAY. IS IT VULNERABLE TO INTENSE HEAT? TOO BAD I DON'T HAVE SOME KING-SIZED FLAME-THROWERS HANDY!

THEY USED THEM TO FIGHT THE MONSTER IN THAT MOVIE! IT DIDN'T WORK, THOUGH--

--BUT I REMEMBER WHAT DID! OH BOY! I JUST HOPE IT WORKS AS WELL FOR ME!

THE UNDERGROUND HANGAR COMPLEX IS A MILE FROM THE MANSION, CONNECTED BY A HIGH-SPEED SUBWAY. THIS MONOCAR CAN MAKE IT IN LESS THAN A MINUTE.

BUT, THOUGH IT DOESN'T SEEM LIKE MUCH...



...A MINUTE CAN SOMETIMES BE A VERY LONG TIME.

KITTY HASN'T EVEN GONE HALFWAY...



...BEFORE THE DEMON DERAILS HER MONOCAR.

SHE FINISHES THE JOURNEY ON FOOT-- NINE HUNDRED METERS IN THREE MINUTES-- IGNORING THE WHITE HOT POKERS STABBING THROUGH HER CHEST WITH EVERY GASPING BREATH, AND THE BLINDING SHARDS OF PAIN FROM HER LEFT KNEE THAT REDUCE HER TO A HOBBLE BY THE TIME SHE REACHES THE HANGAR.



THERE, IN THE LAUNCH BAY-- ON THE ELEVATOR THAT LIFTS IT TO THE SURFACE FOR TAKE-OFF-- SITS THE X-MEN'S MODIFIED SR-71 BLACKBIRD. PROBABLY THE MOST POWERFUL AIRCRAFT ON EARTH, IT IS CAPABLE OF CIRCLING THE GLOBE WITHOUT REFUELING, OR SOARING TO THE EDGE OF SPACE, OF FLYING AT HYPERSONIC SPEEDS, OVER FIVE TIMES THE SPEED OF SOUND.

IF THE MONSTER WANTS ME, IT'LL HAVE TO COME DOWN THE TRANSIT TUNNEL. THERE'S NO OTHER ENTRANCE TO THE HANGAR COMPLEX FROM THE MANSION.

THE HANGAR IS CONSTRUCTED OF STEEL AND CONCRETE--A COUPLE OF METERS THICK. EVEN THAT CREATURE WOULD HAVE A HARD TIME DIGGING ITS WAY IN HERE.

I'M COUNTING ON IT BEING TOO ANGRY TO TRY...

...OR WANTING ME SO BADLY THAT IT'LL FOLLOW THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE, CERTAIN THAT I CAN DO NOTHING TO DESTROY IT.

SUPPOSE IT'S RIGHT?

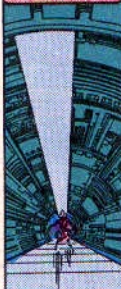
I DON'T SEE IT YET, IN THE TAIL CAMERA. NOW TO RUN THROUGH THE IGNITION CHECK LIST. PLEASE, LORD, DON'T LET ME FORGET ANYTHING.

MASTER SWITCH, ON. INTERNAL POWER, ON. BRAKES, LOCKED. FUEL PUMPS, ON. WHAT'S NEXT? I... I -- DON'T KNOW!

THINK! THINK!



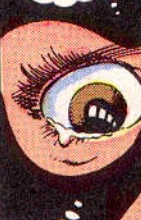
IT'S COMING!



WHAT'LL I DO?!

STOP IT!

RELAX! RELAX. DEEP BREATH. CALM, STAY CALM.

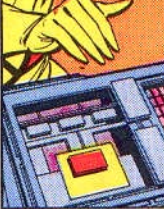


DON'T RUSH, TAKE YOUR TIME.

EVERYTHING'LL BE ALL RIGHT.



WAIT!



THE BLACKBIRD'S ON A TURNABLE. I CAN FOLLOW THE MONSTER ANYWHERE INSIDE THE LAUNCH BAY.

BUT I HAVE TO WAIT 'TIL THE LAST POSSIBLE INSTANT-- 'TIL IT'S RIGHT ON TOP OF ME. THAT'S THE SPIRIT, YOU SLIMY HORROR, YOU.

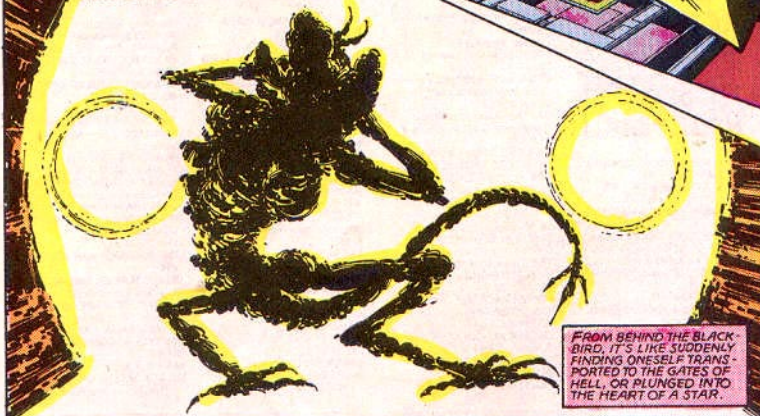
COME TO KITTY. JUST A LITTLE CLOSER, SUCKER. A COUPLE OF MORE LOUSY STEPS...



GOT YOU!



TWO ENGINES, EACH RATED AT TWENTY THOUSAND KILOGRAMS OF THRUST, FLARE TO LIFE AT THE TOUCH OF A BUTTON. THEY'RE AT FULL EMERGENCY POWER, AFTERBURNERS PUNCHING TWIN PILLARS OF FLAME FROM THE HUGE EXHAUSTS.



FROM BEHIND THE BLACKBIRD, IT'S LIKE SUDDENLY FINDING ONESELF TRANSPORTED TO THE GATES OF HELL, OR PLUNGED INTO THE HEART OF A STAR.

A HOWLING BASSO ROAR FILLS THE HANGAR, AS AWESOME IN ITS OWN WAY AS THE ENGINES' FIRE. THE ENGINES WERE NEVER MEANT TO BE FIRED UNDERGROUND-- AND ESPECIALLY NOT AT MAXIMUM THRUST.



THEY CREATE BLAST WAVES THAT SHAKE THE COMPLEX LIKE A SMALL EARTHQUAKE.

METAL--STRESSED BEYOND ENDURANCE--BENDS, SHRIEKS. TELLTALES IN THE COCKPIT FLASH URGENT WARNINGS. KITTY IGNORES THEM UNTIL FINALLY, WITH AN ALMOST HUMAN SCREAM, THE LANDING GEAR BUCKLES AND THE BLACKBIRD HURLS ITSELF FORWARD ACROSS THE LAUNCH BAY, INTO THE FAR WALL.



THEN, AND ONLY THEN--AS SHE FEELS THE UNDERCARRIAGE COLLAPSE--DOES KITTY SHUT DOWN THE ENGINES, FLOODING THEM WITH FOAM TO PREVENT A FIRE. THE SILENCE IS DEAFENING.

I'M... SORRY, BLACK-BIRD. I WISH I COULD'VE THOUGHT OF ANOTHER WAY.



KOFF!
KOFF!

I MUST'VE KAYOED THE AIR CYCLERS. THE HANGAR IS SO THICK WITH SMOKE I CAN HARDLY SEE.

THE AUTOMATIC SPRINKLERS HAVE MALFUNCTIONED, TOO. I'LL HAVE TO ACTIVATE THEM MANUALLY.

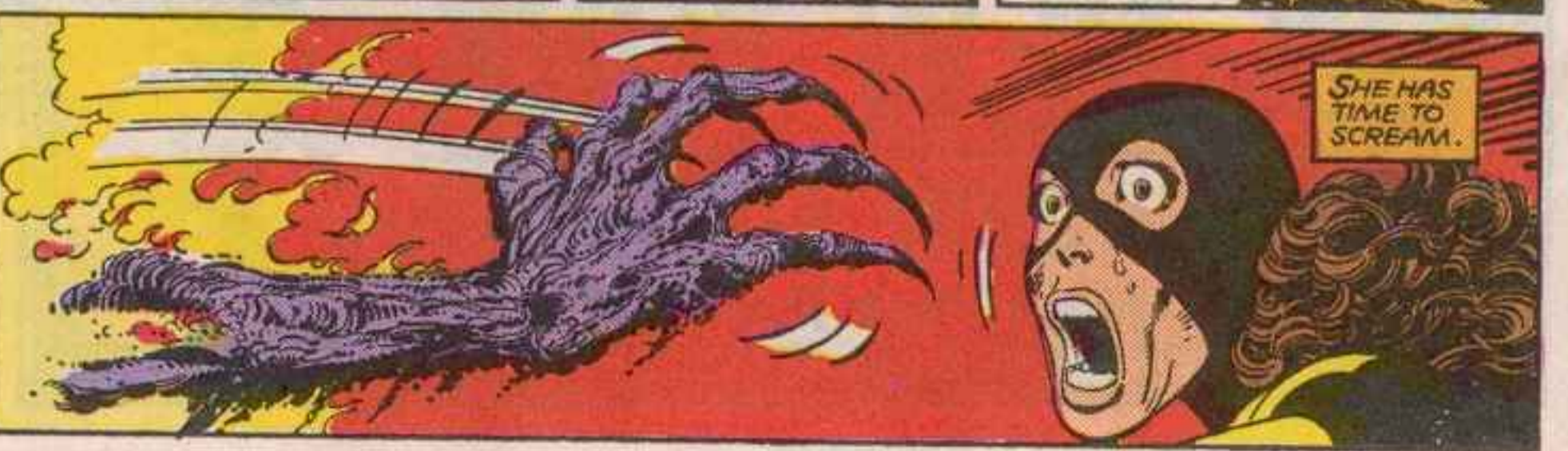
I'D BETTER WALK ON AIR. THINGS ARE STILL BURNING, AND THE FLOOR'S SO HOT I CAN FEEL IT THROUGH THE SOLES OF MY INSULATED BOOTS.



WHERE'S THE MONSTER?! DID I KILL IT?!?

I HAD TO. NOTHING COULD HAVE SURVIVED THIS HOLOCAUST. NOTHING!

SHE HAS TIME TO SCREAM.



IT'S MIDNIGHT BEFORE PROFESSOR XAVIER'S ROLLS-ROYCE RETURNS TO THE MANSION. ICY ROADS AND AIRPORT TRAFFIC JAMS CAUSED EXPECTED DELAYS. AN UNEXPECTED OBSTACLE WAS A POLICE ROADBLOCK IN SALEM CENTER.



THERE HAD BEEN A SERIES OF GRUESOME MURDERS NEARBY EARLIER THIS EVENING. THE LAST UNCOMFORTABLY CLOSE TO XAVIER'S SCHOOL.

THE POLICE WERE ALERTING ALL THE LOCAL RESIDENTS, AS WELL AS CHECKING ALL STRANGERS PASSING THROUGH TOWN.

NO LIGHTS, PROFESSOR. THAT COULD MEAN NOTHING. IT IS LATE. KITTY COULD HAVE GONE TO BED.

PERHAPS, PETER. BUT THERE IS A MIASMA OF EVIL ABOUT THE HOUSE...

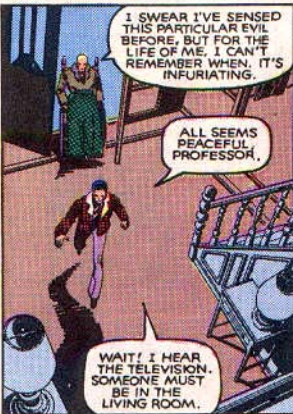


...THAT INHIBITS MY TELEPATHIC ABILITIES. CHECK INSIDE. ORORO, STAY HERE TO PROTECT THE CAR.

THIS IS STRANGE.



IT IS SIGNIFICANTLY COLDER INSIDE THE HOUSE THAN OUTSIDE.



I SWEAR I'VE SENSED THIS PARTICULAR EVIL BEFORE, BUT FOR THE LIFE OF ME, I CAN'T REMEMBER WHEN. IT'S INFURIATING.

ALL SEEMS PEACEFUL PROFESSOR.

WAIT! I HEAR THE TELEVISION. SOMEONE MUST BE IN THE LIVING ROOM.

KITTY!



Yawn!

Hmh... ???
OH -- Hi, PETER.



PETER!!

OH, WOW!
OH, THANK HEAVENS!
IT'S YOU!

WAIT!LL YOU HEAR WHAT HAPPENED TONIGHT! YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW HAPPY I AM TO SEE YOU!

KITTY... PLEASE...



MOM!!

DAD!!

YOU GREW A BEARD!

IF YOU'RE HAPPY TO SEE PETER, KITTEN, HOW D'YOU FEEL ABOUT US?

SHORTLY...

I'M SO GLAD YOU BOTH COULD MAKE THE TRIP. CARMEN, YOUR PRESENCE HAS DONE WONDERS FOR KITTY'S MORALE.

CHARLES, TO BE HONEST, YOU COULDN'T HAVE KEPT US AWAY. I DIDN'T REALIZE I'D--~~WED~~--MISS OUR KITTEN SO MUCH. OUR VISIT--YOUR SPECIAL CHANUKAH SURPRISE--IS AS MUCH A GIFT TO US AS TO HER.

KITTY, I'M JUST BEING UP-STAIRS TO MY ATTIC.

Uh-oh.

WHAT PRECISELY HAPPENED WHILE WE WERE GONE?!

I WAS ATTACKED BY A BKG. UGLY MONSTER.

A-- MONSTER?!

ORORO, YOU HAD TO SEE IT TO BELIEVE IT. WE FOUGHT. I GOT LUCKY. I WON.

BUT, IN THE PROCESS, WE KINDA WRECKED THE DANGER ROOM.

"WRECKED... THE DANGER ROOM?!"

AND THE BLACKBIRD, AND THE HANGAR, AND A LOT OF THE HOUSE.

ARE YOU ANGRY?

I'M NOT QUITE SURE, BUT FROM THE SOUND OF THINGS, I'M FAIRLY CERTAIN I SHOULD FEEL TERRIBLY PROUD OF YOU.

OH. MY.

GEE.

IT HAD BEEN THE CLOSEST OF CLOSE CALLS. SHE WAS TOO TIRED AND TOO SCARED TO PHASE WHEN THE DEMON REACHED FOR HER.

BUT IT WAS DYING ON ITS FEET, ITS UNEARTHLY FORM CRUMBLING INTO DUST WITH EVERY STEP.

ALONE, ON CHRISTMAS EVE, KITTY PRYDE UNDERWENT A RITE OF PASSAGE--

SHE PASSED.

IT COULD HAVE KILLED HER, HAD IT GOT ITS HANDS ON HER.

IT TRIED. IT MADE A SUPREME EFFORT. IT FAILED.

-- A SUPREME TEST OF HER ABILITIES, HER INTELLECT, HER COURAGE, HER... SELF.

NEXT

THE RETURN OF CYCLOPS!