I

There is an old saying in French that Xi’an had always rather enjoyed.

*Dans une grande âme tout est grand*—or in English, “in a great mind, everything is great.”

Xi’an was not shy about the fact that her life had been difficult. Being Vietnamese was never going to be easy. Being a woman was never going to be easy. Being a lesbian was never going to be easy. It goes without saying that being a lesbian Vietnamese woman, at times, felt like one of the hardest things in the world to be.

And that’s *before* she became a Mutant.

But for all of the struggle and strife that Xi’an Coy Manh had endured throughout her life, she had tried to remind herself of that old saying. In a great mind, everything *was* great. Yes her life was hard, but it was far less difficult than it had been since they fled Vietnam. Yes, she struggled, but she had been given the extraordinary gift of telepathy and psychic possession. Yes, things were not always great. But she could be great, if she just put her mind to it.

And then, there was the Viper incident.

A great explosion, the gnashing of teeth, a Hell on Earth that had convinced Xi’an’s teammates that their friend—their beloved Karma—had fallen in battle.

If you had asked Xi’an Coy Manh what she thought would have been a preferrable outcome, she might have told you that it would have been better for her to have passed on.

And unfortunately, *c’est la vie* does not begin to cover the toil that is yet to unfold.

\*\*\*

This was not the first time Xi’an had lost herself... but it was so sudden.

One second, she was with her team, but my guard was down. And then something wriggled inside her head. And she was feeling every writhing motion as it pressed against her skull—forcing her to double over and begging her to retreat.

*ne t'inquiète pas ma fille*

The voice was dark and rich. Heavy, and wet. It spoke to her in French, as though it were trying to comfort her. But the way that it “spoke” was hardly comforting at all. It was dark and heavy; the words emanating a dank heat with every psychic breath as the being slithered around her skull, trying to get comfortable by hollowing out from behind her eyes. She could almost feel scales scrape against her palms as she pressed them tight against her ears, her eyes rolled into the back of her head as she continued to convulse in agony.

*bientôt*

*ça va bientôt s'arrêter*

Hurking and writhing on the ground, the physical pain of fighting off possession was nothing compared to the trauma that she was building in the Astral Plane. As her consciousness became dwarfed by the towering mass of shadows that established itself brick by brick in her mindscape, she could *feel* the darkness creeping in from all around her.

Instead of the deathly chill that she was expecting, Xi’an found it the opposite. It was hot and wet—almost marsh-like in its density. The darkness that surrounded her was almost like the darkness that she and her family had fled in Vietnam. The thick *schlop schlop* of her legs in the rice fields, splashing as they ducked to avoid gunfire.

*nous ne sommes pas si différents*

*est-ce que je ne parle pas comme vous?*

*soyons amis, petit voyant*

It was difficult to describe exactly *how* it happened.

Surmounting the towering beast, this shifting shade of superiority that built itself to be so big and powerful, was not something that she should have been able to do. But the darkness, being so much like what she remembered, taking her back to home during such times of strife, putting her *back there…*

*s'il te plait, petite voyante, j'ai besoin de toi*

*tu… n'es rien sans moi*

*t-tais-toi, petite salope!*

In the trappings of the mental palace that Xi’an had been placed it, she had been able to latch onto the anger, the *fear* that had once permeated her day to day life. Even with her powers, even with her family, Xi’an had been so *small* in her home country. She had been *weak*. And being cornered, having that weakness thrust upon her, it *unlocked* something inside of her that she had never quite realized was there.

In a great mind, everything is great.

And if there was one thing that being an X-Man had taught her, it was that Xi’an Coy Manh certainly had one great mind.

*à la fin, nous ne sommes pas si différents*

*…petite voyante.*

With an almost heartbreaking whisper, the presence inside of Xi’an’s mind began to die.

The slithering fortitude coiling itself around the stem of her personality started to loosen. The hot fanged breath of that which was poised to strike slowed and faded into a quiet gasp. The Shadow King had been placed in check, the darkness becoming overwhelmed by the brightness of Xi’an’s great mind.

It was not the voice of her family that called out to her. Not her brother, her parents, her uncle. Nor was it the Professor or her teammates. When backed into a corner and forced to draw upon inspiration, Xi’an had dipped from a well deep within herself that she had not quite understood—and one that she would not understand for some time.

But the implications of this would not be upon her for quite some time.

The writhing and the pain lessened as the presence that attempted to turn her powers against her slowed into a death knell. The pressure building between her ears and behind her eyes released as every muscle in her body began to finally relax after what felt like hours of fighting off that parasite.

The sound of her own breath would be the first thing that she noticed when she pulled herself out of the astral plane.

It was haggard and taxed, but Xi’an could at least take solace in the fact that—for now—her lungs filled of her own volition.

— — —

When Xi’an had shaken the Shadow King’s control, she awoke over international waters.

The time in which the Shadow King had wrestled control of her body had been (fortunately) brief, but it had been substantial enough that he had made considerable travel arrangements; all while wearing Xi’an as a mask. Whatever connections he had, his would-be host wasn’t sure. But no one on the boat that she had found herself boarded spoke English, French, or even Vietnamese.

*Probably by design,* the young Mutant thought to herself, *If he could control my mind in such a way, I’m all but certain most of these men have been mentally broken by him as well.*

It wasn’t until a few days of forcibly keeping herself safe using her telepathy and jumping from guard to guard that the cargo ship finally docked in the country of (according to all of the intel that she’d gathered) Madripoor.

*This was such a long way to go…* the doubt was inevitable, but still bitter by the ounce as it poured over her like sickly seawater, *The professor… my friends… they’re never going to find me all the way out here…*

And then there was another thought; one that she absolutely dreaded.

Even if she hadn’t been telepathic, Xi’an would have been able to place a general sense of where she was on the globe. Even if they had docked on a smaller island in a different country, she knew that she was in Southeast Asia—the buildings, the people, the languages being spoken both aloud and privately, all of it felt so familiar.

Not the same, of course.

But familiar.

Madripoor was a smaller island not far away from Vietnam. Not far from *home*—the place that she had fled in hopes of a better life.

For a while, she had thought that she’d found that; doing good with the Professor and his team of New Mutants. But getting attacked by that psychic parasite that wanted to take over her body, being forced to hide out on a cargo ship like a fugitive while she forced people to protect her, and drifting all the way back to the place that she had spent so much time running from wasn’t exactly conducive to the sort of optimism that would have been required to get out of a sticky situation like this.

The air around her was heavy and wet, tinged with salt as the smells of cuisine similar enough to that which she could find in Vietnam began to trigger memories of home. Good and bad.

Mostly bad.

“…I need to get out of here.” Xi’an said aloud, eyebrows angled tightly as she steeled herself, “And the sooner that I do that, the better.”

But before she could do any of that, she was going to need to set up a base of operations. Somewhere where she could get some rest—her powers didn’t work well when she hadn’t slept or eaten regularly, and having spent three days on a boat while staying up all night to mentally steer the guards away from her was not going to help her do much more than survive.

She hated it, but she wasn’t going to be able to let this guard go. At least, not until she got settled.

They didn’t speak the same language, but Xi’an didn’t need to speak to be able to get him to feel sorry for the poor, foreign girl who just needed to be walked safely home. Her empathetic powers of persuasion would do whatever any genuine sense of empathy the man had left after being a slave to that psychic parasite. Making herself *invisible* to the team of guards was a lot less taxing than just nudging them in the right direction towards being a good Samaritan.

Besides, it felt good for someone to worry about her. Even if it was just for pretend…

— — —

Further into land, away from the townhomes where the rich and elusive could buy beach-front property, the area just outside of town was full of these little hovels.

Shoddily constructed apartment buildings, really—this one had been abandoned fairly recently if the set dressing was to be believed. She could stay in one of the rooms for a little while, if need be. Until she could get in touch with her team more reliably.

*Hopefully the Professor picks up on my psychic signature…*

But being this far away, there was no way of knowing.

She was on her own out here. Fresh from battle with the Shadow King after she fought off his awful psychic attack, stranded in a place where she didn’t speak the same language as anyone else, and unable to reach out and connect with the group of fellow Mutants who were just like her.

Hopefully, it wouldn’t be too long. But in the meantime, surely she could manage to scrounge up some resources while she was here. Learn the language as much as she could. Flipping through the memories of locals nearby was helpful in that regard at least. But first, she needed to rest.

And rest was something that she fully intended to do.

Once the guard she had empathized with was a full two blocks away and his memory of the last few hours had been wiped, Xi’an simply melted into the cheap, squeaky bed. Staring up at the cracked ceiling in the hot, familiar heat Xi’an would find herself feeling at least a bit comforted by the similarities of some of the places she’d grown up in.

As her eyelids grew heavy, the young Mutant quickly plummeted into a deep, dreamless sleep. The empty hum that had been playing since Karma had fought off the Shadow King quieted once more.

She would feel better in the morning; at least, better enough to make better use of her powers.

After all, in a great mind everything was great. But Xi’an couldn’t start to really fix things until she was back up to snuff…