

“How about Betsy?” he said, lining up the cue before drawing it back.

I stopped him before he started bringing it forward. “Gotta call it first, ‘Lex.”

“Right.” He smirked a little. “Nine, side pocket.”

He didn’t hit the ball nearly as hard as I’d figured he might. Instead, he cut it slightly, putting a hard, deliberate spin on it. That caused it to cut back hard when it hit the green felt of the bumper...coming back to kiss the nine directly on its center. The yellow-striped ball crept slowly toward the pocket, finally dropping into its depths with a satisfying *thup*.

Across the room, sitting over on the tall bar stools, ‘Berto shot me a grin. Then: “Nice shot, man.”

He nodded once, adjusting his beat-up, curled cowboy hat. He picked up his beer from beside him and threw a slug back. “Thanks. It’s a Summers thing, the angles,” he said, looking at the kid—even though I knew it was more for my benefit.

Both of them were looking at me now. It was kinda uncomfortable, actually. “Yeah?” I finally said, raising a brow in their direction. *If they had something to say, I figured...*

“Uh, well,” Sam said, shrugging a little. “What *about* Betsy?”

I chuckled. *Oh yeah. Almost forgot that was out on the table.* “Nope. Not interested—on both sides, I’d guess. Been down that road, anyway. Didn’t work then, can’t figure it would now.”

“Ten, corner pocket,” Alex said, glancing up at me just to make sure I’d heard him. I’d heard him all right. I should’ve known not to get myself involved playing pool with any male member of the Summers clan. I didn’t consider myself a half-bad player, but I’d lost enough money to Scotty when we were kids that you’d think I’d have known better by now. Alex? He wasn’t quite the shark that his older brother was...but you could see that he had at least some of his freakish talent with spatial geometry. Makes you wonder if their old man was Minnesota Fats...not some kind of interstellar freedom fighter.

“You know who you should hook up with, man?” Roberto said, talking with his hands, as he liked to do when he got excited. Must’ve been a Brazilian thing, how animated he got, everything big gestures and facial expressions. His accent was deep with a Latin American flavor that somehow made him sound a little like Cheech Marin to me, although I would have never told him that to his face. “Ororo. Man, *think* about it, dude! She’s, like, still like a *princess* and shit...but she’s still real down to earth, you know, man?”

“Plus,” Alex added, “it doesn’t hurt that she’s drop-dead gorgeous.”

He punctuated the sentence by stroking the cue. This time, he went the length of the table, splitting the four and the six balls. I watched the white ball strike the blue and white one, sending it on its way down towards the corner. I could tell right from the jump that it didn’t have enough, though, and it started to stall out well before the pocket. It finally stopped an inch and a half off the lip.

“Nice shot, Alice,” I jabbed.

He shrugged, grabbing his beer and sitting on a stool, leaning against the wall. “It’s called a *safety*, for the pool-ignorant, feathers,” he pointed out, taking another sip. “Anyway, you’re still four balls down.”

“Lorna said the same thing about you,” I winked, picking up my stick and circling the table, looking for my next move.

Sam gave Alex a quick glance to see how he took the jibe, then gave me one too. “Dang,” he said, a little wide-eyed. “Rough crowd.”

Alex just blew it off, like I figured he would. “You gotta give Warren a break, kid,” he smiled. “He’s still taking it a little hard.”

“Taking what hard?”

“The fact that he’s lost so much cash to me an’ Scotty since we started playing that CNN’s reporting that they’ve just renamed Worthington International Summers and Summers Inc.”

‘Berto snickered. I shot him a withering glance back over my shoulder. “Oh *yeah?* It’s *funny*, huh? Who the hell invited *you*, anyway? I don’t exactly remember saying ‘Roberto, would you like to come down and join Alex and I for some pool?’”

Alex flashed a wide, cheesy grin. “*I* did. I figured the kid wouldn’t mind seeing what the big boys do to fight off the pre-mission jitters. Plus, I figured it’d rattle your cage a bit—which is always a good time, too.”

I snorted. “Nice.”

“I thought so.”

After walking the table a bit, I finally decided on trying to play the long bumper. That way, I figured, it might give me a little better leave on the four.... “Three ball, side pocket,” I announced.

“Your funeral.”

I looked up the length of my cue at him. “Stealing your big brother’s material now, huh? Where’s he at tonight, anyway? In hiding?”

Alex finished the last of his Coors Light, dropping it into the wastebasket that sat at his side. “Nope. He’s with Chuckles, as usual. Working out some last-minute type pre-mission details, I guess.”

“Sounds like a good time.”

“Oh, I figure so,” he rolled his eyes a little.

I finally took my shot. You know how, when you’re shooting pool...and you line up your target...and you start to bring the stick forward—sometimes, you can just *tell* you took a good shot? Well, that’s how it felt when I struck the cue ball. Just that pure, solid stroke that feels good all the way up the length of your arm, when you follow through. As it left the end of the stick, I watched it strike the side bumper, right where I wanted it, meeting the red three ball right on the number. Kissing it hard, it sent it down into the far side pocket, simultaneously, starting to spin back hard with the English I put on it. That drew it back to almost the exact spot where I’d originally shot from—right next to the four ball.

“Ooh,” Berto nodded. “Fuck yeah.”

I grinned. “That buys back the front lobby,” I nodded at Alex, “time to start working on the first floor. I wouldn’t start moving your horses into the stables yet, cowboy.”

Sam nodded in his direction. “That *is* a pretty nice hat you got there, Alex.”

“I like it,” he said, heading over to the antique jukebox in the far corner of the room, while I started lining up the four for a tap-in. “I picked it up in Mexico, a few years back. Me and Logan got into a few scraps together, out that way. On the way back, he gave it to me. It’s dusty and way beat-up, just like him, but it fits perfect. Plus I like wearing it to remind him that he still owes me one for pulling his ass outta the fire on that little caper.”

“Four, corner,” I muttered before tapping the ball down.

“Don’t worry, Sammy,” he said, looking back at him for a second before tapping his selection into the machine. “You’ll pick up your own souvenirs on the way. Hell, you might even get something tomorrow, if you play your cards right. And when you get up to the big team—you can work on yours too, ‘Berto.”

The guitar started pouring out of the big speaker at the bottom of the box, something that I recognized was Springsteen, even if I couldn’t name the exact song. I wasn’t so hot with music, like that. “But,” Alex finished, practically leering at me, “I believe the relevant question wasn’t so much what *Sammy’s* gonna get—it’s who *Warren’s* gonna get tonight.”

I shook my head. “Man, there’s no quit in you, is there, ‘Lex?”

He sat back down, grabbing another Coors on the way. He tipped the brim of his hat down over his eyes. “Another Summers trait, feathers,” he popped the top off. “I guess we’re nothing if not persistent.”

I looked over at the kid. “See what you’ve gotta put up with?” I smiled. “Now that you’re on the big team—you gotta deal with *this* kinda stuff. Did Charles tell you *that* when you made the jump?”

Alex shrugged. “Ah, I’m just bustin’ balls, that’s all. He knows I don’t mean a bit of it. It just keeps the edge off, the night before—know what I mean? You start thinking too hard about it—you’ll be up all night, a nervous wreck. Then, when it’s go time and Scotty starts barking orders at you, you won’t be worth a shit. I figure it’s better to take it easy. Besides—you never know when you might not be coming back. I’d hate to think that I wasted my time getting all worked up, the day I died, instead of getting the best out of it I could. For me, that means talking about all of the girls in this Mansion that would probably never even *consider* giving any of us dudes the time of day—and drinking a few beers with some good buddies. That’s where *you* guys come in.”

Roberto was riveted, I could tell. He loved to hear stuff like that. He’d been a New Mutant for so long now that he was just dying for a chance at the big team. I guess maybe that was his way of living vicariously through the big talk. “So man, where in the hell *are* you going tomorrow?” he asked, in semi-awe. “It’s like a fucking state secret around here. *Nobody* wants to talk about it.”

“Six, corner pocket,” I announced. But nobody was really listening.

“Genosha,” Alex said simply. I made a face. The reason Roberto hadn’t heard anything is because it was *supposed* to be a secret. Heck, none of *us* were supposed to know about it until tomorrow morning’s mission brief. In fact, *I* hadn’t known about it until Alex had told me, right before the kids had come in for tonight’s festivities. But, the cat’s out of the bag now, I guessed.

“To tell you the truth, we may not even end up going,” he went on, after a long sip of brew. “I guess the Magistrates are going to send their shit-hot military type guys in there first, before we get the go-ahead. But if they can’t nail the UNSUB, that basically leaves it up to us. They call in the cavalry.”

“UNSUB?” he Brazilian asked. “What the fuck is *that*?”

“Unknown Subject,” he clarified. “Big-boy talk for mystery-man.”

“So we don’t even know what we’re getting ourselves into, huh?” I asked.

“Nope. I guess not. But I guess whoever—whatever—it is, it wiped out their First Division of Royal Armored Marines. Now they’re supposedly sending in their best heavy hitters to stop it. The mutant kind, too. We’re the next wave.”

“I thought we, uh, didn’t exactly have the best relationship with the Genoshan government,” Sam asked. I was impressed. It was the right question. “How do we know it’s not just a trap?”

“We don’t,” Alex allowed. “But that’s not the Chief Magistrate’s style, either. If he wanted us, he’d try and *take* us on his own. He doesn’t need to resort to bush-league tricks like that. You gotta remember, Sammy—he’s what amounts to the President of a very, *very* wealthy country. If he calls us in, it’s because he *needs* us.”

I didn’t like the sound of it a bit. “What in the hell could be so bad that they’d need to do that, though? Like you said—he’s got a *lot* of resources at his disposal already. What good are we going to do if his own men can’t manage to stop it?”

“Who knows?” he offered, palms-up. “We’ll just do what we always do, I guess. We’ll figure *something* out. We’ll figure out what we’re dealing with, improvise, or some such shit, and we’ll beat the big, bad UNSUB. Case closed.”

Roberto shook his head to himself. “Man, dude, you make it sound easy.”

“Like I said—it’s what we do,” Alex said. Another beer, off to heaven in the form of the wastebasket. “It’s what we’ve done since I got here as kid not much older than you, and it’s what we’ll be doing when you’re saying the same thing to a bunch of new X-Men. We figure out a way to win. We *have* to—because there’s no alternative.”

“Now,” he looked up at me, “are you gonna *shoot*, or did you suddenly just develop some new mutant power—and you’re gonna *stare* that six ball down?”

I laughed. It all seemed okay, the way he said it.

But when I stared down that six ball, I could sense it, just at the edge of hearing. Behind me, over in the dark corner, lit by only the soft neon of the jukebox, the Boss was

singing to anybody that would listen to him. Belting out his soul—and it sounded like he was talking to me, in particular in that still, freeze-frame moment. It was an odd, eerie feeling. It drew me in and I could help but listen to him.

“In the day we sweat it out,
In the streets of a runaway American dream
At night we ride,
Through mansions of glory in suicide machines.
Sprung from cages out on Highway 9,
Chrome wheeled, fuel injected
and steppin' out over the line.
Baby, this town rips the bones from your back
It's a death trap, it's a suicide rap.
We gotta get out while we're young
'Cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run....”

I recognized the song, then. Something forgotten, from my youth.

Something in the bottom of my stomach suddenly felt light.

Like the sensation when you're walking over your own grave.