

## Magical Mutations

### Chapter 10

The road was no more than a narrow slit through endless trees, and every step Harry took thumped up through the soles of his sneakers into the base of his spine. He tried to keep his pace even, but the blacktop slanted uphill, making it even harder to run. Sweat soaked through his shirt, and the material clung to his muscular frame. He pumped his arms, inhaled, and exhaled in rhythm. He didn't try to use his powers to augment his body. That was the point. There was supposed to be no shortcuts.

It was a punishment run, he told himself. The Danger Room drills had started to make him winded, and that wasn't good enough. He wanted to be as fit as the others, maybe fitter. He could teleport, sure, but even that required a burst of energy he'd never fully mastered. If his body couldn't hack it, he'd be useless, powers or no.

The sun was getting low, and the sky behind the trees was slashed with pink and dirty gray. He knew the road twisted back on itself in less than a mile, but every turn looked exactly like the last. There were trees, brush, and even more trees. Harry kept his head down while sucking in deep breaths and let the rhythm push him forward.

There was a flicker of motion in his peripheral vision. He tried to ignore it, but the hairs on his arms prickled. He didn't slow down, but he stole a glance over his shoulder. He didn't see anything but the front row of trees and the darkness beyond. It was just the endless parade of gnarled trunks and shadows. He snorted and rolled his eyes at himself. The expansive mansion grounds were safe. There was a fence, cameras, and all the security money could buy. If something was watching, it was probably a deer or maybe a raccoon desperate for a meal.

Still, he ran harder. His shoes slapped louder against the blacktop, and his heartbeat picked up to match his pace. There was a heavy, wild smell in the air. It was the kind that belonged to a large animal. He was sure now. He was not alone.

He crested the next rise, and the road bent back toward the main drive. He could see a little patch of sunset reflected on the far-off lake through the trees. He slowed his pace and then stopped, his hands braced on his knees. Sweat dripped from his face, and he wiped it with his forearm as he looked around.

He heard the snap of a branch, closer than before. It wasn't the dry crack of something small, but the full-bodied break of something thick and heavy. Harry straightened his back and narrowed his eyes as he peered into the woods. For a second, the forest looked like a mess of black cutouts overlapping each other. He took a step back onto the pavement, his heart hammering.

There was a rush of air, and a massive weight slammed into him from behind. His vision twisted along with his body. Harry felt the impact like a train wreck. Pain radiated up through his shoulder and down the side of his face as he skidded across the asphalt and into a tangle of undergrowth. Leaves and dirt filled his mouth. His vision blurred, then went sharp again as he thudded against a rock. Everything stopped moving, except for the ringing in his skull and the lurch of his heartbeat.

He blinked away the brain fog, pushed up to hands and knees, and spat out a mouthful of blood and leaf mulch. His shoulder burned where it hit the road, and his elbow was torn open, but he could already feel the pain subsiding and the weird tickle of skin knitting back together. He pushed himself upright, wiped his face, and stared through the trees. Something was coming, and it was big.

A shadow moved between two trunks. Harry braced himself, ready to fight if he had to, but the thing stalking him didn't rush. It walked on two legs with long, confident strides. He heard the scrape of claws against tree bark. Then the thing stepped into the light.

Sabertooth looked bigger than Harry remembered. He wore an open vest, torn cargo pants, and nothing on his feet. His arms were covered in coarse, yellowish fur, and the scars running up his left bicep looked fresh. He grinned, showing a mouthful of yellowish canines.

Sabertooth watched Harry closely as he snarled. His eyes were small, yellow, and nearly lost in the mess of matted fur and scar tissue that crisscrossed his face. He took the time to enjoy the moment, licking blood off his canines as he stalked forward. His left hand flexed as he showed off his long, dirty claws.

"Hey, runt," Sabertooth said, his voice twisted into a parody of cheer. "Long time no see."

Harry didn't blink. He matched Sabertooth step for step, edging away from the boulder and angling for open ground. "You've got the memory of a goldfish," he said, snarling back. "Last time I saw you, you crawled away with your tail between your legs."

Sabertooth grunted, unamused. "We got unfinished business." He flexed his right shoulder, testing it, and made a loose fist. "Last time was a draw, but this time, I'm taking something with me."

Harry inhaled, trying to calm the unnatural rage that was threatening to boil over. He closed his fists, and both hands burst into flame. The heat rolled off his knuckles and ran up his forearms, but it didn't burn him. He saw Sabertooth's pupils contract, and for a second, Harry thought he saw a flicker of doubt. It was gone a moment later.

"Go to hell," Harry said. He thrust his hands forward, and two jets of blue-white fire exploded outward, splitting the dusk. Sabertooth dived low and to the left. One jet cut through the branches, torching a half-dead pine, but the other caught Sabertooth on the chest. The impact

made a wet, hissing sound, and Sabertooth was thrown back into a tree hard enough to snap it off at the root.

Sabertooth's vest disintegrated into ash. Fur and flesh sizzled, and the smell of scorched meat hit Harry in the face. Sabertooth rolled to his feet, his shoulders hunched, and his hands scraping the dirt. His chest was a blackened mess, but Harry could see the muscle and tissue already knitting closed, turning pink and raw-looking.

"Big mistake, runt," Sabertooth spat, his beady eyes going wild. He threw back his head and roared, and the sound echoed through the woods, rattling the birds out of every tree. Then he charged.

Harry braced himself, and fire streamed from his hands, forming a shield. Sabertooth barreled through it, flames licking up his arms and face, but he didn't slow. He hit Harry like a battering ram with his claws flashing and teeth snapping. Harry brought his arm up to block, and his claws slashed bone-deep. Blood spattered the ground, and Harry twisted and threw himself backward, landing hard on his back. Sabertooth was on top of him in an instant, his hands wrapped around Harry's throat.

Harry's vision tunneled from the sudden lack of oxygen, but he grabbed Sabertooth's wrists and let all the heat and power he could muster surge into the monster's arms. Sabertooth howled as his flesh bubbled and split around the bones, but he didn't let go. He didn't let up even a little. Harry's vision started to go black.

He tried to twist out, but the grip was relentless. Desperate, he let go of the fire and focused on the ground underneath. The earth under his back liquified, sucking him down. The sudden drop caught Sabertooth off balance, and for half a second, the pressure on his neck loosened. Harry flashed away, leaving Sabertooth knee-deep in the muck. Harry appeared in front of him in a burst of fire. He caught Sabertooth in the ribs with a vicious kick and sent him rolling. Harry gasped, rubbed his aching neck, and blinked the haze out of his eyes.

Sabertooth shook off the smoldering pieces of his own skin. His chest was mostly healed into a patchwork of scar tissue and scorched fur, but his forearms were a complete mess. Harry could see exposed bone, though the wounds were rapidly healing over. "Nice trick," he rasped. "But you're running out of steam."

Harry wiped blood from his arm and spat into the dirt. "Not even close."

Sabertooth stretched his claws. "Let's see if you're still this cocky when I feed you your own legs." He pounced faster this time, and his dirty claws gleamed in the fading light as Harry's fiery hand swung up to meet the charge.

## **Magical Mutations**

The afternoon was unseasonably warm, and Logan made the most of it. He was flat on his back with his head stuck under the frame of an old Harley, wrenching a stubborn, rusty bolt. His shirt was off, and the muscles in his chest and arms flexed with every twist of his hands. Every now and then, he'd let out a grunt or swear quietly when the wrench slipped.

Jean and Scott were sparring on the patch of grass near the garage. Jean circled with light, bouncing steps. Her arms were up and ready, and her hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail. Scott moved efficiently, using angles and pivots, and never giving up a straight line to the target. Their practice was controlled and friendly, but the tension between them was real. Neither of them liked to lose.

Logan tightened the bolt, gave the tire a hard thump, and slid out from under the bike. He shaded his eyes against the sun and watched as Jean ducked under Scott's jab and swept his legs out from under him. Scott hit the grass with a thud, then looked up at Jean, who offered him a hand.

"Nice one," Scott admitted, letting her pull him up.

"You were getting predictable," Jean said. She grinned, then stuck her tongue out. Scott ruffled her hair in retaliation, and Jean laughed and shoved him away.

Logan shook his head with a faint grin across his lips. "If you two idiots are finished dancing, can I get some help with this damn chain?"

Jean flipped him off with a smile and started over. Scott followed, wiping the grass off his jeans.

It was then that all three of them saw it. There was a lance of white-blue fire streaking up through the treetops beyond the lake. It shot high into the air before vanishing. The ground vibrated just enough to set Logan's teeth on edge.

Scott squinted at the horizon. "What the hell was that?"

Jean's smile faded. "That's the north trail," she said. "Harry was heading out there for his run."

Logan's hackles rose. He put the wrench down, wiped the grease from his upper lip, and lifted his nose to the air. He sniffed deeply and then froze. "Son of a bitch," he said, and spat again. "Sabertooth."

Scott tensed. "You sure?"

Logan nodded, and his voice was practically a growl. "I'd know that stink anywhere."

Jean looked into the distance and saw several more flares of glowing light. Her hands clenched tightly. "We need to get out there ... like now."

Suddenly, Storm burst out of the back door. Her hair was pulled back in a white ponytail, and she wore a lab coat over a very tight pair of running shorts. She moved with purpose, and her eyes scanned the horizon. "Xavier says Harry's in trouble. Serious trouble. I'm going ahead," she said, and without waiting, she took off running. Ten steps later, the wind whipped around her, and she lifted into the air, angling up over the trees.

Logan didn't waste time. He wiped the grease on his pants and jogged to the garage. "Jeep," he ordered. Scott was already unlocking the door, and Jean sprinted for the passenger side. Logan slid behind the wheel, started the engine, and floored the pedal. The tires squealed, then caught on the slick concrete floor. The front wheels skidded as he swung backward out of the garage.

Jean barely had her seatbelt on. She braced herself on the dashboard as Logan took the first turn way too fast. "Careful!" she snapped.

Logan grinned. "I'm always careful, Red. You two keep an eye out. If Sabertooth brought friends, we might have a mess on our hands."

Scott rolled down his window and scanned the treeline. "Can you go any faster?"

Logan stomped on the gas, slamming the jeep over a pothole and onto the dirt track. The trees blurred past as they followed the flicker of firelight ahead, and the echo of a feral scream made Jean's skin crawl. Above them, Storm's silhouette flashed against the late afternoon sky as she rode the wind and closed on the site.

Back in the jeep, the three passengers were being tossed and jerked aside as they flew over the uneven ground. Logan didn't let up. He slammed the stick into second and took the next bend hard. "Almost there," he grunted. "Hang on." Jean yelped as the jeep hit a high spot on the road, sending her body flying up. Thankfully, her seatbelt kept her safely in her seat. That didn't stop her from shooting Logan a withering glare. Logan looked at her and chuckled.

## **Magical Mutations**

Harry ducked as the tree tore through the air above his head. It was the whole trunk of a young maple, ripped out of the ground and wielded like a caveman's club. The wind of its passing fluttered Harry's hair. He rolled left, and dirt and pine needles stuck to his sweat-drenched skin. Sabertooth let the momentum spin him, then jerked the trunk back and swung again, this time lower. Instead of dodging, Harry disappeared in a burst of fire. He reappeared twenty or so feet behind Sabertooth.

Sabertooth roared in frustration. His face was half-melted, and one ear hung limp. His chest fur was still smoking from an earlier blast. It should have slowed him down, but Harry watched as pink new skin bubbled up under the charred patches. The beast grinned with what was left of his lips.

Harry raised his hands, and he pictured the dirt beneath Sabertooth's feet as liquid, soft as soup. With a twist of his wrist, the earth under Sabertooth's feet collapsed, sucking him down to the thighs. The big man barely paused. He just hurled the maple trunk at Harry. Harry sidestepped, but it clipped his ribs. The impact staggered him, and every nerve screamed in protest. He didn't have time to count the bruises or guess how many ribs had cracked. Instead, he focused on the branches overhead.

He flicked his fingers, and a dozen branches ripped free from the trees. They hovered in the air, twisted together, and formed long, sharp spears. With a grunt of effort, Harry flung them all at once. Sabertooth tore his legs free of the mud just as the first spear hit. The sharp tip punched through his stomach, and the second embedded in his chest. He wailed and tried to dodge, but the others struck home, pinning him to the nearest pine.

Harry took a step forward, adrenaline running through his veins. The spears wouldn't hold Sabertooth for long. Already the monster's hands were yanking out the wood, one by one. Blood gushed, but it closed over the wounds almost immediately. Harry wanted to scream in frustration. He raised both hands, conjured fire in each palm, and poured it out as fast as he could. The blue fire swept across the clearing, torching everything in its path.

Sabertooth vanished inside the flames, but then he burst out, screaming with his hair on fire. He hit the ground rolling. He then spun to his feet and barreled at Harry. Harry teleported again, but this time Sabertooth anticipated it. He doubled back and leaped, catching Harry as he appeared on the other side of the clearing.

The claws raked across Harry's chest. The pain was white-hot. His t-shirt was shredded, and blood ran down his ruined skin in thick ropes. The wounds were deep, and for a second, Harry thought he might black out. Harry dug deep, and his entire body burst into flames, giving him a new surge of energy. He lunged forward and punched Sabertooth in the mouth, letting out all the rage he felt.

The fire immediately engulfed Sabertooth's head. The force of the blow drove the beast's skull sideways. Harry heard the crack as Sabertooth's jaw shattered. He staggered with one hand cradling his face, and the other slashing blindly. Harry pressed the advantage.

Sabertooth's jaw hung crooked, and the lower half swung like a loose gate. He spat blood and bits of bone onto the dirt. The fury in his eyes was pure, but there was a note of fear now. He turned to run, but Harry hurled a fireball at his back. It hit a tree next to Sabertooth, exploding it into a hail of wooden shrapnel. Splinters peppered Sabertooth's exposed skin. He howled and tried to keep moving, but then the sky rumbled. Black clouds swirled into existence, blanketing the woods in an eerie darkness.

Thunder cracked so close it felt like it ripped the air out of Harry's lungs. Then a lightning bolt as thick as a telephone pole smashed down on Sabertooth's back. For a second, the monster

glowed blue-white, and Harry swore he saw a silhouette of his skeleton beneath his skin. He screamed once and then collapsed onto the dirt, twitching and spasming.

Storm dropped out of the sky, and electricity was arching from her eyes and fingertips. She landed in the clearing with a force that sent a shockwave through the ground. She turned to Harry, saw the slashes on his chest, and her face twisted with worry and fury in equal measure.

“Are you alright?” she asked, crossing the clearing in three long strides.

Harry nodded as the fire on his body extinguished. “It hurts like hell, but I’ll live.”

She examined the wounds with gentle but confident touches. “You’re lucky. Another inch and he’d have gutted you.”

Harry laughed, which hurt more than he expected. “I didn’t plan on getting within slashing range.”

She pulled a scrap of his shirt up and pressed it to his chest, staunching the worst of the bleeding. “You need to get to the MedLab.”

“Sabertooth ...” Harry said, pointing at the twitching heap.

Storm’s gaze was icy cold. “He’s not coming anywhere near you ... and if he does, I’ll be waiting.”

Sabertooth, incredibly, was already trying to get up. He flopped on the ground like a fish, but his arms worked as he dragged himself away from the smoking crater. The skin on his back was fused and blackened, but new pink tissue was already bubbling at the edges. He shot Storm a look of pure hatred, then rolled into the brush and out of sight.

Storm moved to follow, but Logan and Scott crashed into the clearing, quickly followed by Jean. Logan went straight for Harry, his nostrils flaring.

“He got you good, kid,” Logan said, his eyes glued to the wounds.

“Don’t worry. I got just as good,” Harry grunted.

Jean grabbed his hand, and her green eyes were wide with worry. “You’re bleeding all over,” she declared, looking at his horrible wounds.

“It’s already closing,” Harry said, looking down at his chest. The blood on his skin was drying, and the deep gouges were knitting shut. It was strange seeing the muscle and skin crawling back together. He looked up at Storm and Logan, flashing a cheeky grin. “Not bad, huh?” Storm huffed, and Logan snorted in amusement.

Scott joined his side and offered a flask of water. "Can you walk, or do you need a stretcher?"

Harry shook his head. "I can walk." He took the flask and gulped down some water. His shirt was ruined and covered in blood. He focused his powers, and the shirt cleaned and repaired itself.

Storm put a hand on his shoulder. "Next time, don't fight alone. Even with your tricks, Sabertooth will always be physically stronger and more durable."

Harry nodded, too exhausted to argue. Logan clapped him on the back. "Not bad for a rookie," he said. "But you got a lot to learn. Storm's right. Don't tangle with that prick alone. Even I haven't managed to gut him yet."

"Next time, I'll be ready," Harry said. Jean slipped her arm through his, determined to help him in some way.

They started back down the trail with Harry leaning on Jean. He was fine to walk on his own, but he definitely wasn't going to turn down a chance to press up against the very sexy Jean Grey. Logan walked a few steps ahead, sniffing the air while muttering about shoddy security systems. Storm circled above, scanning the woods with her eyes. Scott came up the rear, keeping his head on a swivel just in case Sabertooth decided to ambush them. At the first bend in the path, Harry looked back.

The clearing was empty except for a huge crater where Storm had fried the miserable prick. He grinned stupidly. He would never admit it to them, but he found the whole ordeal exhilarating. Harry liked testing his strength, and he knew he would only get stronger with practice. However, he put that out of his mind as Jean's curvy body rubbed up against him.