

Structural Damage

By Hex, Ashlan, and Alicia

Challenges:

Vacuuming the floor

Doug Ramsey

You'd think it would be easy, after the first fifteen times the mansion got blown up. We're used to clean-up, have been for years. There's a definite routine. We joke about it at times. But it doesn't explain why I'm suddenly finding it so important to vacuum the damned floor.

"Kitty?" Ororo asks, poking her head through the door. "We do have professionals here to do this sort of thing." She looks tired and worried, almost afraid to interrupt me. "Perhaps you should lie down? Try to rest?"

"The floor is dirty, Ororo," I say calmly. The Oriental rug is covered in plaster dust and bits of wooden debris. "It needs cleaning."

She says nothing more, and I don't notice her leave. The room is a mess; it needs concerted attention. There's glass all over the rug as well, from what used to be the coffee table. The magazines that used to be inside are here and there on the floor, scattered, some of them in pieces. There's part of a National Geographic there, a picture of people scuba-diving on the cover. I remember that last vacation in St. Thomas, how much he liked the diving...

The TV's a loss. We'll have to replace it. Maybe the Professor will shell out for a nice widescreen plasma TV. The kids keep saying we need to move into the future. It always makes me laugh, given the technology in the basement. I liked the old TV. It had character. I remember all the times that we sat in this room watching bad kung fu movies without the subtitles. He would always translate for me...

I pause. Focus on vacuuming the rug, Katherine. This is just a room that needs cleaning up. I move the vacuum around the Oriental rug, right up to the edges. Just beyond, I see the scuff marks where our couch used to be.

Used to be. Where's the couch? Where's the fucking couch? I'm so angry, suddenly. That couch has been here since the time we were students. The structure wasn't badly damaged, and it isn't as if we haven't had to reupholster furniture before. It could have been fixed.

I can't deal with this.

I turn and walk away, leaving the vacuum running. Over where the wall used to be, you have a good view of the back gardens. The Professor's got a small army at work out there, repairing the landscaping. Busy little bees – all they care about are flowers. They have no individual will, no autonomy. They're just working together towards a common goal. Fixing the gardens is the most important thing in the world to them.

Maybe I should go out and walk through some flowerbeds. Trample all over their hard work. Just like the Sentinels did.

But no. I've got my room to clean.

“Kitty?” It’s Scott this time. I wonder what he’s doing out of the medlab. His arm is in a sling, and some of his cuts clearly haven’t been attended to yet. I suppose Hank must still be very busy down there. “Katherine?” he tries again.

Maybe if I ignore him, he’ll go away. But no, this is Cyclops.

“Yes, Scott?”

“I don’t think you should be in here.” His voice is very calm, not threatening but very firm. “Have you been down to have Hank look at you yet?”

“No. I had to look after my students, and now I’m cleaning.”

“I see.” And he does. I just don’t want to hear about how he understands. “There are other places you can clean if you feel like you need to clean.”

But this is not the best place for you right now, Katherine, I complete mentally. Scott has not gotten any less transparent in the last ten years.

“Well, Scott,” I say in a perfectly calm voice, “I think I want to put this room back together. I’ve always liked the room. And while we’re on the subject, what did you do with the fucking couch?”

He just looks at me. “The couch is with the rest of the furniture that couldn’t be salvaged, Kitty.”

“The TV’s still here.”

“We hadn’t gotten around to taking it out yet.” He’s still watching me. Worried. As if I’m some kind of wounded animal who’s going to lash out at him if he blinks. “Why don’t you come down to the medlab with me, Kitty? Hank needs to look at you. Then, if you want, I’ll come with you to see-“

I round on him in fury, my hands clenching into fists. “I said I want to put this room back together,” I grit out. Damn him, he’s still standing there.

“I see what you’re trying to do,” he says finally. “But there’s major structural damage in this part of the mansion, Kitty. We don’t know if the roof is stable.”

“If the fucking roof falls on me, I’ll phase.” His mouth twitches; I think the profanity bothers him. Good. Maybe I need to push it a little farther, shriek at him. Something, anything to get him out of here and away from my room.

I turn away from him and start to pick up the magazines. The National Geographic – last month’s issue, I hadn’t even read it yet – a couple of Cosmos, a couple of comic books, a

copy of one of Ororo's gardening magazines. There are other papers strewn around the floor as well. Almost where the couch used to be. They're white-lined, college-ruled pieces of paper, different handwriting on each one. Latin translation exercises. Some of them are marked in red. Some aren't. Doug must have only gotten through part of the stack. He told me he needed some quiet time to get these marked. That's why he was down here. Sprawled on the couch, marking, when the Sentinel came through the wall.

A strangled scream bubbles up in my throat and I hurl the magazines and papers at Scott. "He was just a teacher! He wasn't an X-Man! He wasn't supposed to be in the line of fire like that!"

Scott doesn't even duck. Most of the papers don't reach him. A few land at his feet. "I'm sorry, Kitty."

That's all he has to say? 'I'm sorry, Kitty?' That's it? One of my best friends dies right here in this room while I'm outside, fighting Sentinels, being the X-Man, and that's all he can say? Doug wasn't supposed to be in the line of fire like that. He was supposed to be safe. We were supposed to keep them all safe.

"How many bodies are in the medlab, Scott?" My voice isn't as calm as I'd like this time. "What's the butcher's bill for yesterday's little adventure?"

Scott's looking right at me, or I think he is. I can't quite tell. I can't see his eyes, of course. It's bothering me more than it ever has. Doug had the most expressive eyes...

"Sixteen," he says. "And we'll probably lose Jeff, Hank says. We didn't get him out from under the debris in time."

"And how many were X-Men?"

Scott jerks back a bit, as if I had struck him. "None, Kitty," he says in his Cyclops voice. "You know that."

I start across the room towards him, one deliberate step after another. "And what does that tell you, Scott? We have thirteen, possibly fourteen students dead, and two teachers. But no X-Men. Funny, given that we were the ones who were supposed to be on the front line."

The muscles along Scott's jaw are twitching. "We didn't bring them here, Katherine," he says. I think I pissed him off. What a pity. "Tell me, what could we have done better? There were too many of them. We had as much warning as the security system could give us. We did everything we could."

"We didn't do enough!" I shout at him. "None of them should have died! What fucking good are we when we can't hold up our end of the bargain? We gave up any hope of a normal life to protect them and we couldn't even do that! *What fucking good are we?*"

Scott's voice, when he speaks, is still perfectly calm. "Do you think I don't grieve for them, Kitty? I do. I grieve for them every bit as much as you do. But the living need us right now."

I kick the vacuum cleaner, but phase by accident as I do, and the vacuum dies as its motor shorts out. Suddenly it's so quiet. It's just me and Scott in this mess that used to be a room.

"It's not that simple." I'm not shouting this time. "This is too much. I can't be the good X-Man this time." My voice is starting to shake. "He was just lying there on the couch. I thought he was unconscious. But I went to turn him over and his face was gone..."

Scott takes a step towards me, lays a hand on my arm. I step away, but he doesn't react to that. "I'm not asking you to suck it up, Kitty," he says. "I just want you to come away from here."

"I can't put the room back together, can I?" I ask, my voice small and cracked. Can't put Humpty-Dumpty back together again.

He reaches out again and takes my hand, and this time I don't pull away. "If you really need to do this," he says gently, "I'll help. I'll even get you another vacuum."

I'm laughing suddenly, but I'm crying, too. "Just a little while longer, Scott? I'm not ready to leave yet."

"All right, Kitty. But I'm trusting you to phase me if the room comes down on our heads."

And I'm standing there, sobbing hysterically, trying to turn away from him. But he's holding me, and maybe the cleaning can wait for a little while.