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- Getting to know the concept of mutants
- Discovering mutants in the Marvel Universe
- Exploring conflicting mutant philosophies

Chapter 1
Children of the Atom

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In the universe of Marvel Comics, the X-Men are one of the most important families of characters. They debuted in 1963 and, after a few difficult years, exploded in popularity in the mid-1970s. However, that was only a precursor for the rocket ride that the group would take in the 1980s and 1990s as they became a powerhouse of popular culture.

The obvious questions would be: Why did the X-Men blow up when they did, and what is it that connects so many readers and fans to the characters? Fortunately, we've got answers. But before that, we have to address the very first question that a new reader would have when stepping into the world of the X-Men.

What Is a Mutant?

The vast majority of characters featured in the various X-titles are mutants. In real-world scientific terms, the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines a mutant as "an organism that is different from others of its type because of a permanent change in its genes." That change is called a mutation, and a conventional mutation in a human being can be anything from a variant eye color to sickle cell anemia.

In the pages of Marvel Comics, however, many mutants have experienced a genetic change prior to birth that grants them uncanny super powers. These powers

run the gamut from physical expressions (great strength, wings, accelerated healing) to abilities of tremendous magnitude (telekinesis, weather control, energy manipulation).



TECHNICAL STUFF

An Omega-level mutant is a mutant who possesses massive power with "an undefinable upper limit." Storm and Magneto are both Omega level (see Figure 1-1).

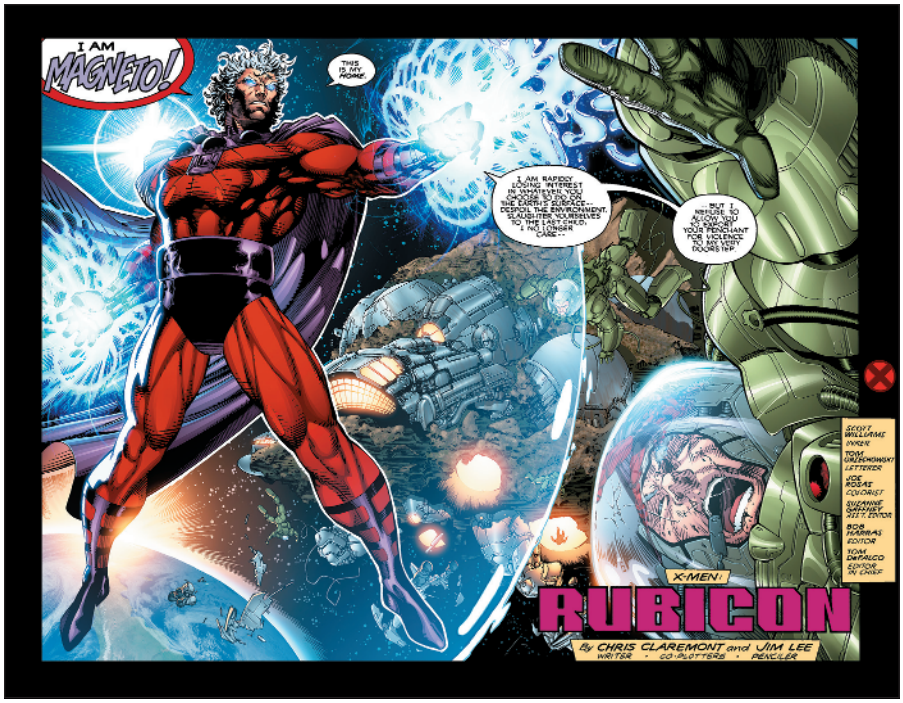


FIGURE 1-1: Magneto displays his power above the Earth.

Story by Chris Claremont and Jim Lee. Art by Jim Lee, Scott Williams, and Joe Rosas.

That means that Marvel's mutants are generally born with their powers, but those powers don't typically appear or activate until that mutant reaches puberty. At that point, when the body begins its transition to adulthood, the amazing powers locked inside that person begin to blossom. While some powers are easily controlled, others can be extremely dangerous and require some discipline to handle.

The dangerous nature of some mutant powers and the inability of newly discovered mutants to control those powers has created a climate of fear around mutants in the pages of Marvel Comics. While many people understand that the mutants are just different and trying to deal with the problems that are occasionally created by their powers, others express open hostility to mutantkind, ranging from prejudice to anti-mutant extremism.

Mutants in the Marvel Universe

If Stan Lee had had his way in 1963, the first X-Men comic would have been called *The Mutants*. When he and Jack Kirby created a team of teenage heroes who were born with an "X-tra power," Lee just wanted to follow the science and put mutant right there in the title. However, publisher Martin Goodman pointed out that many young readers might not understand what a mutant was.

Lee and Kirby came back with a new title: *The X-Men*. Not only was the leader of the young heroes named Professor X, but the "X" could also stand for "X-tra power" and made for a cool logo to adorn the belt buckles of the teams' matching uniforms. Never mind the fact that no new reader would know what an "X-Man" was until they cracked open the pages; X-Men just sounded *cooler*.

In the beginning, the X-Men operated in secret out of Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters at 1407 Graymalkin Lane in Westchester, New York. The opening of the first issue revealed that the school was also a facade for the secret headquarters of the team. Kirby envisioned an area in the school where the X-Men could train and sharpen their powers; he called it the Danger Room, and we see the team there in the first few pages of the first issue (see Figure 1-2).

Professor Charles Xavier, aka Professor X, had a mission statement of finding young mutants and training them in their powers with a long-term goal of both protecting and assimilating into mainstream humanity. Xavier was already aware of mutants like Magneto, who originally believed that mutants should be seen as the next step in evolution, there to replace the human race.

It was also important that the original X-Men were teenagers. Their struggles with their powers mirrored the struggles that real adolescents go through with changing bodies and emotions. Also, most of Marvel's other heroes at the time were adults. Reed Richards (Mister Fantastic) and Bruce Banner (Hulk) were well-educated scientists. Tony Stark ran a corporation. But, much like Spider-Man, the X-Men were young people with young people problems.

By the fourth issue of *X-Men*, Magneto had formed his own team running counter to Xavier's intentions: the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. He also had two young team members: Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver. The twin siblings struggled not only with their understanding of their abilities, but with the issue of whether they were on the wrong side by backing Magneto's vision of mutant supremacy.

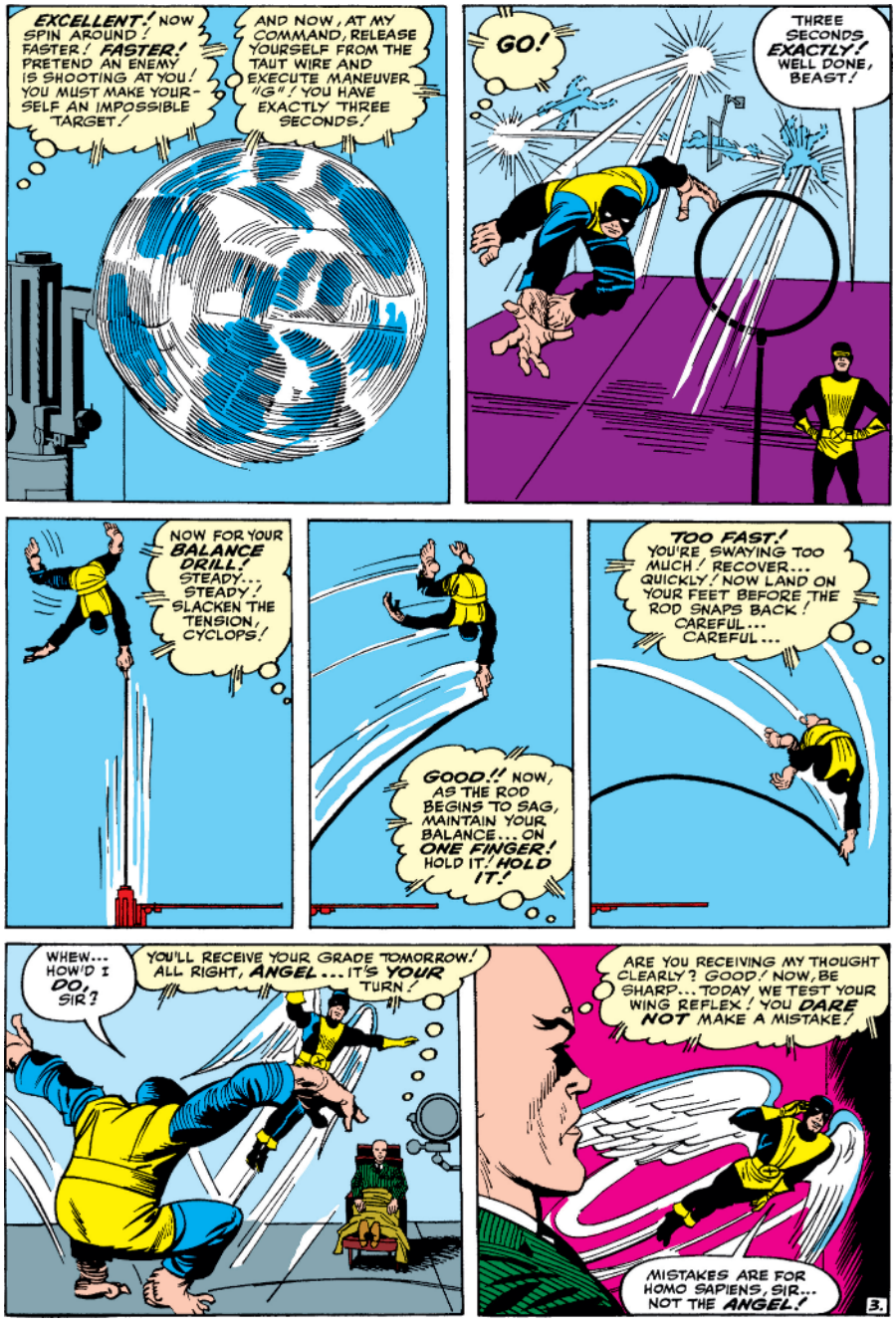


FIGURE 1-2: The X-Men get down to training in the Danger Room.

Story by Stan Lee. Art by Jack Kirby and Paul Reinman.

That initial conflict set much of the groundwork for the X-Men in the comics. On one side, you had a group dedicated to protecting the world while envisioning harmony, and on the other side, you had a team willing to go to extremes to conquer the people who already feared them. In many early issues, the two teams came into conflict trying to find and recruit mutants to their side. Sometimes the X-Men failed, such as when mutants would become antagonists. On other occasions, they met people who would ultimately become long-term allies or team members, like Polaris.



REMEMBER

Professor X found many mutants using a mutant-detecting machine of his own design, Cerebro, which was powered by his telepathy.

Over the years, the X-Men would grow, expand, and sometimes splinter. As a result, many factions of benevolent mutants developed with differing, even conflicting agendas. Also, as more mutant antagonists were discovered, many were revealed to have their own plans and far-reaching goals. This means that the mutant world can be a complex path of strained alliances, hidden agendas, and competing philosophies.

Conflicting Philosophies

The root belief system of the core X-Men team has always been taking responsibility for power. That is, the X-Men believe in protecting both mutants and humans alike while aspiring for a world in which everyone can coexist without fear. While different iterations of the team over time have expressed that value in different ways, the idea of the X-Men as protectors has existed from day one.

That is owed to the founding philosophy of Professor X, who was originally intent on guiding the X-Men with that dream of cohabitation as their number one principle. He grounded the instruction of the original team in that notion, hoping to teach the students that living alongside humans was better than trying to live "above" them. Let's look at some of the various schools of thought to be found among the various mutant teams.

Professor X and the X-Men

Essentially, the X-Men typically fight for "Xavier's Dream," a world that represents peaceful coexistence. In the early days, Professor X even worked directly with the FBI, trying to lend some legal legitimacy to the X-Men's actions. In their first public appearance, the X-Men protected the American military missile base

Cape Citadel from an attack by Magneto. Xavier wanted to establish the X-Men as a benign, helpful presence who didn't represent a threat to humanity (you learn more about the original mission in Chapter 2).

Magneto and the Brotherhood

As established by Magneto, the Brotherhood worked to draw mutants to their cause and belief that the world of humans should be overthrown and ruled by mutants. Part of Magneto's radicalization against humans developed when he saw the atrocities committed against his people during the Holocaust.



TECHNICAL STUFF

Magneto financed his early operations with gold that he took from Hydra's Baron Wolfgang von Strucker.

Magneto targeted a number of mutants for recruitment and also used them in his schemes against the X-Men. He was willing to use lethal force, such as when he sank a Soviet submarine that fired on his island. However, during a battle with the X-Men, he nearly accidentally killed a young Kitty Pryde. Magneto realized that he had become like those he hated, and his regret over harming Kitty stirred a change in him. He began to move to more of a middle ground, willing to act in defense of the world while still maintaining a staunch attitude of protecting his fellow mutants. (I cover more about the early days of the Brotherhood in Chapter 2.)

When Mystique launched her own version of the Brotherhood, her team employed terrorism in their goals to destabilize the human-dominated world. Their first major action was the attempted assassination of the anti-mutant United States senator, Robert Kelly. The X-Men saved Kelly, but that didn't stop Mystique's group. They engineered other actions, like prison breaks, before they took the ironic turn of working for the U.S. government under the name Freedom Force.

Cable and X-Force

Cable was born in the present, but grew up in a future that had been dominated by the ancient mutant Apocalypse. A soldier through and through, Cable fought for a version of Xavier's Dream that dictated that you proactively hunt down and take out evil mutants. Some of the young mutants in the orbit of both Cable and Professor X, whom Cable led under the team name of X-Force, referred to Cable's way as the "closed fist" versus the "open hand" of Professor X (learn more about that in Chapter 5). Cannonball rationalized that perhaps the true path was somewhere in the middle, as an open hand could be used to slap, causing harm, while the closed fist could be used to protect, as he demonstrated by holding a tiny mouse (see Figure 1-3).



FIGURE 1-3: Cannonball discusses the open hand and closed fist.

Story by Fabian Nicieza. Art by Greg Capullo, Harry Candelario, Steve Buccellato, and Marie Javins.

Apocalypse

The ancient mutant Apocalypse is governed by the guiding principle of "survival of the fittest." He is possibly even the first mutant on Earth. He has exhibited no problems with killing certain mutants under the idea that he would make mutantkind overall stronger. Apocalypse wants humanity to evolve, meaning that he wants mainstream humans to die off and be replaced completely by mutants. He has tried to force this issue with a variety of schemes though the years, but has been opposed by many X-teams, including X-Factor. (See how they first clashed in Chapter 4.)

X-Factor

The original X-Factor team consisted of the five original X-Men (Cyclops, Jean Grey, Iceman, Beast, and Angel). Operating under the guise of human mutant hunters, they actually tracked down mutants and helped them escape incarceration and persecution, even working with some to teach them how to control their powers. However, that scheme made some other mutants mistrust them, as they bought the ruse completely. Later, a second X-Factor team under the lead of Cyclops' brother, Havok, worked for the U.S. government to protect the populace from mutant (and other) threats, ostensibly replacing the earlier Freedom Force. (Get the lowdown on X-Factor in Chapters 4 and 5.)



TECHNICAL STUFF

A later X-Factor team operated as a detective agency that specialized in mutant cases and general weirdness.

Alpha Flight

Canada's Alpha Flight was a super team that was built to protect Canada. Several Alphans were mutants, notably its original intended leader, Wolverine, and founding members (and twins) Northstar and Aurora. (Find out more about the Flight in Chapter 5.) Alpha Flight was part of a structure that included subordinate teams Beta Flight and Gamma Flight, both of which had mutant members. The program allowed the mutants to train in the use of their powers and help humanity. During the so-called Krakoan Age, public sentiment turned against mutants. Half of Alpha Flight appeared to be battling the other half in public; however, the two teams were secretly working together to help fugitive mutants escape persecution.

Orchis

A confederation of human supremacists, Orchis represents in many way the worst of humanity. Determined to see mutants exterminated, the group was built from multiple factions who had grudges or outright hatred for mutants in general and the X-Men in particular. Employing the mutant-hunting robots the Sentinels (some of which were created from technology taken from Tony Stark) and a variety of operatives, Orchis attempted a mass murder of mutants on Krakoa. After a series of battles around the world, the X-Men broke the organization. (Find out more in Chapter 9.)