Cyclops Goes To L.I.M.B.O.

by ELG

Summary

The Avengers go after the bad guys who kidnapped Scott.

[The Avengers get telepathically violated. Scott gets slut-shamed. Logan gets jealous.]

Notes

This fic now has artwork! I'm so happy! Many many thanks to yoshi12370. :)

http://impergaytr.tumblr.com/post/73154622770/this-little-doodle-is-based-on-a-fic-series-i

This story is Part Two. Part One can be found here

There was something wrong. Logan just wasn’t sure what it was – mostly because he wasn’t as sure as he had been who Scott Summers was these days. He figured if he could just work that out those alarm bells from the conversation they’d just had would stop ringing through his brain and he could
have a beer and try to adjust to a world where Cyke was someone else’s problem forever.

Since the Phoenix had got Slim in its cosmic embrace and Slim had killed Charles Xavier, he and Logan hadn’t had too many little chats, so there wasn’t a lot of data for Logan to work with. The meetings in the prison had thrown Logan for a loop, because he wasn’t used to dealing with a Scott Summers who actively wanted to be eviscerated, but he’d figured the guy was back to normal when he’d got himself broken out of prison by supervillains and proceeded to be a massive pain in the ass to everyone. True, he’d seemed more earnest and less arrogant than Logan thought of him in those public announcements he’d been making via starry-eyed student iPhone, and there was the whole swooning after unleashing the eye beams on those popped-out-of-nowhere Sentinels thing which had been a lot less I-face-down-space-gods than the Scott Summers Logan remembered and a little more…Perils of Pauline. At least until McCoy had explained that in the early days when Scott’s powers were manifesting, being a conduit for that sheer gigawattage of power had been enough to make Scott light-headed and prone to the occasional fainting fit, so it was possible the Phoenix Force had left him with an optic blast upgrade and his physiognomy hadn’t adapted to the new intensity yet.

Still…swooning? And according to the time-displaced kids, right into Magneto’s arms, which was enjoyably embarrassing, particularly the way young Bobby had harped on about it. (And, damn right Logan would have been bringing that up at every opportunity if he and Slim were still on speaking terms, just for the fun of watching him squirm.) Logan had also noticed that post-prison Scott hadn’t said anything about him and his crew being the real X-Men as in the good old bad old days when Scott had been king of Utopia. There had seemed, in his broadcasts, to be a few more glimmers of the earnest, why-can’t-we-all-just-get-along Scott Summers of the past, even if his message was mostly ‘stomp on a mutant and we’ll stomp on you’, but Logan hadn’t known how much of that was his mind playing tricks on him because he had the teenage version under his eye all the time, giving him those disconcerting reminders of the Scott he’d first met in all his teacher’s pet, boy-scouty clueless-about-the-big-bad-world glory…. No, not enough data to work with though, really. Not enough to say that killing Xavier had knocked the psychological stuffing out of Scott Summers and put him back to an earlier setting; although hopefully not all the way back to the days when he’d been so damned tortured with self-doubt and ridiculously hard on himself that Jean had spent half her life telling the guy things weren’t his fault, and that nervous breakdown had never seemed too far away.

(And, okay, having your girlfriend play host to a giant cosmic firebird and turn into a god-like creature of astonishing power who then got corrupted by the Hellfire Club, turned evil, chowed down on a star, and killed herself to save the universe from her dark power would probably push any nineteen year old towards emotional wreck territory. Not helped by the whole meeting a girl who looked just like the first love, marrying her and having a baby with her, only to have original girlfriend return from a pod-nap on the ocean floor, meaning the girl you’d been weeping over had been mostly universal life-force and not a lot of Jean, and then having wifey turn out to be a clone of aforementioned first girlfriend who then went crazy and nearly sacrificed your kid to a demon right in front of your eyes had probably not been the emotional rest-cure a kinder universe would have prescribed. The guy had been a widower at twenty-one and had to give up his baby son to future-people to save his life before he was twenty-two. All things considered, it was probably just as well that Scott had got so damned good at repressing.)

No, this Scott wasn’t that Scott. He just wasn’t as much like Utopia Scott as Logan had expected either, and it had thrown him off, like a wrong scent in a familiar room. Even when Cyke had been an ass to the Avengers, it had felt more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger than Logan had expected, watching the footage – and like he wasn’t going to watch that footage over and over again when Stark was working on trying to find a way to banish it from the Internet forever – like Scott was so damned tired of the fight but he wasn’t going to be back down because he knew he was right.
And, yeah, it was possible that Logan had been just the tiniest bit conflicted watching that footage, because he was an Avenger, so, people making them look foolish, was making him look foolish; on the other hand, a mutant had stood there, completely unflinching, as Hawkeye drew a bead on the middle of his forehead, and stared down the Hulk, and then had a teenage girl kick their avenging asses without needing to raise a finger, so, as a mutant, Logan had felt just a twinge of something that might possibly have been pride. And, no, the full smiting might of the Avengers being hurled at Scott Summers, two blondes, and a bunch of kids had not been a shining moment for the Earth’s Mightiest Heroes, especially as they’d been left frozen there snarling for all those hours, and Logan was so glad he had been busy elsewhere that day. Not that Cyke wasn’t still an asshole.

And these are the best of the best. No one is denying that they are the greatest warriors of our generation. Yet...even they won't fight for us or let us fight for ourselves. Even they.

That had definitely sounded more in sorrow than in anger. As if Cyke was more like...somewhere-in-the-middle Scott, and that meant Logan wasn’t sure if could untangle his signals as well as he could with the man who had started X-Force. He and that guy had fought – a lot – but they had known each other damned well. Even when Scott had been the guy serving Logan up to be turned into a vampire to gain a tactical advantage, Logan had known where he was with him – and what Logan was to him, a vital part of that guy’s armory in his fight to keep the species alive, for whom, every now and then Scott would let down the barriers, and allow Logan to glimpse the man behind the visor.

Scott had always had the horrible habit of making people feel necessary to him. Jean, Emma, Logan himself: none of them had ever been left in any doubt that Scott relied on their strength and couldn’t manage without them; and it was habit-forming, being needed by him, feeling buoyed up and warmed by it; just like it was all too easy to get into the way of thinking, that, because Summers could always think them out of any problem they were in, that he knew what the fuck he was doing. The surface perfection did its part to shore up the general illusion, and he’d gotten so confident, just before his fall. He’d stand there, all chiseled cheekbones and flawless jaw-line, so tall and slender and leanly muscled, still so boyishly handsome but looking everything a hero should be. Looking, in fact, so sane, that it was all too easy to think his tactical brain was something pure and dispassionate, as miraculously efficient as a piece of machinery, untainted by the emotional and psychological baggage of being attached to a fucked-up walking nervous breakdown who’d been systematically deliberately mentally, emotionally, and physically abused as a kid, sent out to fight monsters at sixteen, and hadn’t touched base with normal since the age of seven.

It was only when you took a step back, away from that guy’s undoubted achievements and realized that you were trusting the lives of children to someone who had no idea what it meant to be a child that you started to have doubts. And then you realized that Cyke, poor bastard, was probably beyond saving, but those other kids in his care weren’t and you needed to get them the hell away from him before they ended up just like him.

And, yes, he knew Scott liked teaching kids, and that, for all that the guy was such a cold fish that they didn’t really warm to him – unless they were hormonal and crushing on him, something Scott had always been cluelessly oblivious of even when they were more or less undressing him with their eyes – that he did give them the training they needed, that would, under most circumstances, keep them alive even in a mutant-hating world. In that way, Scott was a good teacher. Not as outstanding as Frost – she and Kitty were probably in a class of their own – but he was patient, he was tireless, he was smart at coming up with lesson plans that helped confused new mutants to get to grips with their emerging and often erratic powers, and, given that he had always been the guy who ate all his vegetables, did all his homework, never shirked a workout, and would willingly spend hours in the Danger Room rehashing old missions just to give them all an edge, never asked anyone to do anything he wasn’t willing to do himself. He just had no concept of fun or that childhood should
contain some of it, and, although he could have not only quoted but explained in tedious detail every aspect of Sun Tzu’s work, if asked to explain what the function of a doll was in a little kid’s inner fantasy world, or why he or she might really want to play with one, he would have been as much at sea as if McCoy had asked him to build a working time machine.

Cyke got kids as young adults, he got their need to be treated with respect and kindness, he got their need to be given responsibilities so they could grow into their roles as mature and responsible citizens; he just didn’t get that they might also still need to be kids. And that despite more than a decade of hanging out with Bobby Drake.

Logan actually thought it was more than a random blank spot in Slim’s psyche, he suspected Scott had repressed everything to do with remembering how it felt to be a child, because, in his experience, being a child had been too horrifying an experience for him to be able to revisit it and stay mentally healthy – or as mentally healthy as he could get anyway. He probably thought everyone just associated it with being powerless and mind-fucked and isolated and abused and therefore something they wanted to move away from as soon as possible. Being treated like a grown-up by Charles Xavier and trusted to go on missions had been the nicest thing that had happened to Scott Summers since his parents threw him out of a burning plane with his little brother strapped to his chest and Scott clinging to their last remaining parachute; he was probably never going to be able to grasp that most children’s idea of a good day out wasn’t necessarily narrowly avoiding death by giant killer robot. Making it downright impossible, Logan suspected, for him to empathize with anyone fully between the age of seven and sixteen, because that was the part of his life he had chosen never to think about in the best interests of not being someone gibbering in a strait-jacket.

Yeah, he had Scott clearer in his head now, all the different versions of Scott that he had known over the years, but the one he’d just spoken to, it was like he knew and didn’t know who that guy was. There had been things about him that triggered a deep unease, and things that were just perplexing. Logan walked around the conference room while the sunlight licked the windows, inhaling the scent of Howlett-screwed Summers. It wasn’t like he hadn’t smelled post-orgasmic Scott a thousand times before, given that Scott and Frost had spent most of their free time getting busy, but this particularly bouquet was as disturbingly new as it was familiar. Scott Summers had no business smelling like Logan after-sex when Logan had never so much as kissed him. It made his hair bristle and a growl form low in Logan’s throat. He sniffed again and realized that Scott had smelled weirdly contented. Not a hint of fear either. But his body language had been like someone letting go, and he had made Logan a last goodbye…..

Logan sniffed again; something icy trickling down his spine, because his instincts were there ahead of his brain. No fear scent, and that quiet contentment had taken some rifling through his mental filing cabinets to lock down, but he had it now. Fuck. He was almost sure he had it now – and what Cyke had been smelling of in that conference room was a textbook case of the suicide highs.

Logan started running.

A blur of corridors and elevators later, Logan burst into Stark’s mad scientist laboratory – oddly similar to Beast’s own mad scientist laboratory and Reed’s mad scientist laboratory, as well as Stark’s other mad scientist laboratory in his other penthouse, as if they had all ordered in their equipment wholesale from the same science fiction movie supplier. He found Stark still fine-tuning the portal technology Hill had told him to keep on standby.

Rogers looked up in surprise. “What’s wrong?”

“Where’s Cyke?”

“Being flown to a debriefing by S.H.I.E.L.D. before they let him talk to Blastaar.”
Logan said, “What did Blastaar say when he spoke to Hill?”

“He didn’t speak to her, not directly. This is highest level clearance stuff.”

“Hill’s not in charge?”

“She was in charge of getting me to get you to get Summers. There’s a special committee been set up to be the liaisons on all Negative Zone affairs. I don’t know them. I don’t think Hill does either.”

“So, not S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

“No.” Rogers ran a hand through his golden hair. “This one was need-to-know and I apparently don’t need to know.”

It was all too nebulous, like everyone had been knitting with clouds. Logan imagined electronic orders flitting through, imperious and demanding, but oddly unaccounted for. “That doesn’t make any sense. You always need to know.”

“Blastaar’s citing my rescue of Summers and the others as an act of terrorist aggression. That’s why I’m out of the negotiations.”

“Bullshit!” Logan was really worried now because none of this rang true, not to him and not to Rogers, who was looking as troubled as he felt. “Now I think about it, why is Blastaar even going through diplomatic channels? There’s something wrong here.”

Rogers was watching Logan’s face. “You think they did what I promised you wouldn’t happen and handed Summers over to Blastaar?”

“I don’t know.” Logan wanted to punch Slim hard for not having shared what have evidently been so obvious to him and was still just a vague presentiment of doom to Logan. What’s the point in being smart if you don’t show off about it, Cyke, you little shit? “That guy’s name was always going to get us jumping because we know he has a grudge and he doesn’t mess around, but is Blastaar even in the picture? The guy who got our attention last time by beaming an image of a beaten up Scott straight into Times Square, is suddenly using back channels?”

Rogers hit his communicator. “Hawkeye? Is Summers still with you?”

Barton’s voice came back wind-ragged as he made his way back from the roof. “I just delivered him to the ship. Those guys were in kind of a hurry. It’s already taken off.” They could hear it over the intercom, the roar of engines fading fast. A ship departing at runaway speed.

“Get back here,” Rogers said tersely.

Stark was flicking through channels trying to get the jet on a monitor. “They’re cloaked. Not sure why. Jarvis try and hail the ship that just took off, and get a lock on its flight path.”

Logan watched Rogers and Stark pressing buttons, making calculations and getting steadily more agitated. He hated this part, where everyone tried the technology that wasn’t his area of expertise, before they’d acknowledged that what needed to be done here was something sharp, bloody, and fast. The ship wasn’t answering, not them and not Hill. And it was shielded like it didn’t want to be found. By the time Hawkeye walked through the door, Logan found it impossible not to grab him by the throat and slam him against a wall. “Describe them!”

“Get off me, you adamantium-plated asshole. Describe who?”
“The guys you gave Cyke to!”

“Men in black in a hurry. They dusted off before they had the doors closed. I didn’t recognize any of them if that’s what you’re asking.”

Logan shoved Hawkeye away, that bitter feeling in his gut not lessening at all. “We got played,” he said thickly.

“What are you talking about?”

“I think we just handed Cyke over to no-one-knows-the-fuck-who.”

“They were S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Hawkeye protested. “They had I.D.”

Stark was already on the I.D. angle, demanding that Jarvis get him every camera angle that showed any of the guys who had taken Summers away in their unmarked jet and match them up with every possible database in the galaxy using every facial recognition software program known to man, then do twelve other things, equally impossible, but faster.

“They’re S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Hawkeye repeated. “They have to be. Hill told us they’d be coming.”

Logan said, “Because someone told her they’d be coming. Someone with really good credentials or who could beat a retina scan with shapeshifting technology and has access to S.H.I.E.L.D. comm protocols.”

Stark was still doing lightning fast things on the computers. “Those blood samples – the other way they could have been taken, that didn’t involve teleporting in using Limbo power, was by shapeshifting technology good enough to beat my biometric scan defenses.”

“Or Mystique,” Logan said.

“What would Raven Darkholme want with Cyclops’ blood?”

“She always has some plan spinning. It wouldn’t be the first time she used the blood of an X-Man to grease the gears.”

Rogers was talking urgently to Hill in the background, asking for reassurances that she had had one face-to-face conversation with someone she recognized over the need for Scott Summers to be urgently brought in to help negotiate with Blastaar. When he stepped back from the monitors, his face was taut and set.

“I think Logan’s right. I think we got played. Someone wanted Summers and they used S.H.I.E.L.D. and us to get him for them. Hill’s not a part of this, Logan. She was used as much as we were. She’s been waiting for confirmation that he’s en route to her for the debriefing but the channels she was using earlier are suddenly just showing static.”

Hawkeye held out a pendant on a silver chain. “Summers asked me to ask you to look after this for him. He said there would probably be metal detectors. He didn’t want it getting lost.”

Logan snatched it from him. “You fucker, Slim!” Logan paced angrily up and down the room. “You knew it wasn’t on the up and up.”

“How?” Hawkeye demanded.

“Because he has the kind of mind that could plan something like this. He recognizes the patterns
when he sees someone else doing it."

“And he didn’t feel like sharing with the rest of the class?” Stark demanded. He came over to look at
the amulet, took it from Logan without asking, ran it through some kind of scanner and then said.
“These energy patterns are alien, well, different-dimensional in origin, but in Logan-level language
this a communicator-come-tracking-device.”

“What?” Logan spun around. “You mean if Scott was still wearing it…?”

“He could have summoned help from his dimensional-jumping friends just by pressing it, and with a
lock onto this energy signal I could have tracked him. So, why did he take it off?”

Irritably, McCoy said, “Is Scott setting tests now? I remember Magneto sometimes had a penchant
for luring us to places where mutant-killers were around so he could teach us an important lesson
about life….”

Everyone was looking at the amulet while Stark explained brain-achingly complicated things about
the way it worked that no one but McCoy would understand anyway. Logan was remembering the
way Scott had looked out of the window at that city he didn’t expect to see again. Rogers held the
amulet up to the light to better examine the carvings in the metal and the pale blue stone in the center.
He said, “It’s beautiful. Looks more Etruscan than Greek.”

McCoy said, “The point is that it was a Get Out Of Jail free card and Scott left it behind, Steve, and
he wouldn’t have done that without a very good reason….”

Barton said, “Do you think it’s some kind of trap? Stark puts that thing under a microscope and five
minutes later Hercules turns up with a pantheon of demigods to kick our asses?”

And, as it was Scott, of course everyone was thinking over-complicated. This was the guy who had
dreams within dreams, within protective walls, within the bonded seals of his repressions; the guy
who had survived Apocalypse and boxed up a piece of the Void in his brain….

Logan wondered with a jolt what being possessed by the Phoenix had done to the Scott who had
never been designed to be its host – turned him crazy as fuck and a murderer, for sure, but had it
done anything else? Burned off the last vestiges of Apocalypse? Destroyed that piece of the Void in
his head? And had Scott been unconsciously utilizing that borrowed darkness inside himself to be the
man mutantkind had needed him to be for the last few years? The one who had been unflinchingly
and unrepentantly willing to kill the Evolutionaries to save the Humans, and the Purifiers to save the
Mutants? What if Scott’s alien psychological baggage had been providing a barrier between the Scott
Summers whom Jean Grey had married all those dead mutants ago and the one who had needed to
make the truly shitty decisions for the good of everyone else? And who the fuck would Scott be now
if the Phoenix had taken that emotional kevlar away from him? What if he wasn’t still the man who
had done some of the things he’d done but still had to live with them every day…? Because Logan
knew way too much about being that guy himself.

Stark said, “It makes me nervous when you put on your thinky face, Wolverine. I’m always worried
you’re going to give yourself a hernia.”

McCoy said, “Yes, Logan? What are you thinking?”

“That I may not know who Scott is any more.” Logan paced the stupid, cluttered laboratory angrily.
“I used to know him better than anyone! I knew him better than Jean!”

Hawkeye murmured to Stark, “Are we talking…Biblically here…?”
“With those two, who the hell knows? They used to fight like an old married couple and now they fight like an old married couple after a particularly ugly divorce, so….”

And on any other day but this Logan would have been all over the irony of Tony Stark – unacknowledged cheating, needy, nagging wife to Steve Rogers – calling him and Scott ‘an old married couple’, but today he had alarm bells going off in his head, and they sounded louder than air raid sirens when the bombers were coming over.

“Are you saying he’s had one too many blows to the head and wasn’t playing cosmic chess games with everyone else’s lives for a change?” McCoy demanded.

“Did those blood samples tell you anything before they were stolen?” Logan demanded of Stark.

“A few weird readings, but they were less each time. It was basically filtering out of his system. He doesn’t have any Phoenix abilities left, if that’s what you’re asking?”

“Is he the same guy he was before or is he the same guy he was before…before?”

Stark wasn’t an ass for once. “What ‘before’ are we talking about?”

Logan said, “That’s what I don’t know.”

“I’m just saying the guy’s had a lot of ‘before’s. Let’s face it, Logan, we’ve all had a lot of ‘before’s and most of them don’t handily show up in our blood samples.”

Before Howlett and Hercules; before the Phoenix, and Charles Xavier lying dead by Scott’s hand; before Logan left and never looked back; before Kurt died for Scott’s convictions and Cable died to save X-Force; before Scott put that splinter of the Void into one of his mental chambers of repression; before McCoy left; before Utopia; before Osborn’s dark reign drove them out of San Francisco; before X-Force; before the baby was born that Scott was so convinced would save them all from Wanda’s curse and re-ignite the x-gene she had banished…and they walked into a town filled with flame-throwered children murdered in its place. (Some nights, Logan could still smell their flesh burning; still imagine the echoes of their screams.) Before Scott had died to gain the rest of them some time then let himself be tortured over and over again to save the planet in a strategy that nearly lost them Kitty forever; before they buried the kids who had lost their powers after M-Day, innocents blown up on the bus by Purifiers who had scented blood in the water and moved in for the kill; before Scott found out that the man he loved like a father had gone into his mind and altered it, wiping his memory of the kids Xavier had inadvertently sent to die in Scott’s place, Scott’s own brother among them; before Jean’s last death; before Decimation and poor, damaged Wanda’s three little words turned them from a thriving people, albeit one still reeling from Genosha, into a few desperate remnants looking extinction in the eye, and in the process fucked them so far over that they weren’t upright yet; before Genosha; before Apocalypse; before the Legacy virus…. Stark was right, there were too many ‘before’s for anyone to count. No wonder Logan didn’t know who Scott was any more. He doubted any of them knew who they were any more.

“Is he setting something up? Or did he genuinely think those guys were S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives?” McCoy pressed.

Logan wished he could just let the anger take him, but the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach was overpowering it. “No. He knew the guys we gave him to weren’t kosher and he took off the amulet anyway.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Hawkeye protested. “If Summers knew it was a set-up, why would he go with them and why, going with them, did he leave his patent pending escape route behind?
Did he want to be abducted by bad guys? Has it not happened to him for a whole week or something and he was getting nostalgic?”

Logan turned to McCoy. “What does ‘moritur-something something-lutamus’ mean?”

The way McCoy’s golden eyes widened made the sick feeling in Logan’s stomach get worse. “‘Nos morituri te salutamus’? It means ‘We who are about to die salute you’. It’s what gladiators said to Caesar before they entered the gladiatorial arena. I mean, it isn’t, not strictly speaking, but let’s not quibble about Suetonius right now. Scott said that to you?”

“It was the last thing he said to me before Barton took him away. Damn him!” Logan would have been punching Scott right now if he’d had him in his grasp. Whatever version of Scott Summers had come back from Hercules’ crazy dimension, the bastard had used his last few minutes of freedom to give Logan absolution. How fucking dare he? Logan didn’t want his damned forgiveness, or his permission to go on hating Scott Summers even after he was dead. He’d forgive him or hate him when and how he wanted to. What Scott had left him looking at was a strong swimmer just letting the next wave take him when there was absolutely no need for him to drown.

McCoy said, “This is so typical of Scott!”

“He just…gave up, the son of a bitch. How could he do that to me!” He felt quietly and furiously desperate as he turned to Rogers, needing the guy to be all that Captain America could be in that moment, unfazed, stalwart, unflinchingly focused on their next step.

Rogers didn’t let him down. He was already picking up his shield. “Get Frost and Magneto in here. Tell them what’s happened.”

Stark, who had, in his time, faced down every kind of horror unflinchingly, took a craven step backwards. “I’m not telling Emma Frost that we lost her boyfriend. She’ll melt my brain and then Magneto will bend my suit into a pretzel while I’m wearing it.”

“Not if you tell them that we need their help and we can deal with the recriminations after.”

“After what?” Logan pressed.

Rogers gave him a quietly confidence-inspiring nod. “After we get Scott Summers back from the people who just stole him.”

Logan growled, “As long as it’s understood that the first thing that happens after we save Slim is that I get to hit him. A lot.”

Stark said grimly, “You get no argument from me, Logan.”

Hawkeye said, “I’ll hold him down for you.”

On the whole, Frost had taken the bad news better than expected. She hadn’t turned their minds to mush, and she had told them that if they got Scott back within the hour she might not kill them in a way involving fire ants, eyeballs, or entrails.

Romanoff cast an assessing look Frost’s way as they strode up into the plane, Natasha creaking slightly as her leather costume clung on tight. “You boys got off lightly and she didn’t call in reinforcements in the shape of Rasputin Jr. I wonder what that means?”
It said a lot about Logan’s life that he didn’t even flinch when this close to two incredibly scary women, wearing outfits that looked painted on, and who both had heels that could sever a man’s jugular with one well-aimed kick. In fact, he kinda liked it. He liked to think he would have been that insouciant about it even without the healing factor but it was hard to know for sure. He lowered his voice: “What do you think it means, Widow?”

Romanoff tilted her head to one side. “Her telepathy’s on the fritz or she broke up with Summers. If it’s the second one, I’m calling dibs.”

He disliked the way the plane had that new-car smell. He liked mechanics a man could see; he liked engines to smell of gasoline, and dangerous places to smell of blood and sweat. The Weapon X program had never been honest about what it was, not even in its scents. Those had been air-conditioned and controlled every bit as much as he had; an animal trapped in its gears, encouraged to crank up his hate.

As Romanoff began her take-off pre-flight checks, Logan realized that he didn’t know which of them Romanoff had just called dibs on – Frost or Slim – but that if it was Slim, Logan was going to object. As he strapped himself in, he tested the festering memory-wound in his head that was the scent of Scott having slow, careful love made to him by a man with Logan’s face to see if he could deal with it yet. Then he stabbed his claws through the seat in front of him.

Stark said, “You know, there’s a reason why no one ever wants to sit on your side of the plane, Wolverine.”

Logan found that Frost was looking at him narrowly, and Magneto, as impassive as ever, was also making note of his claws withdrawing from the upholstery. Logan said, “You two should never have let Slim run off with Howlett. You should have known how much that would screw him up.”

Magneto said, quite mildly, “I’m not Scott’s keeper, and our version, at least, is well above the age of consent, making it really none of my business whom he chooses to spend time with or in which dimension he does it. If you wish to impose a curfew upon the teenage version of Scott while he is living in your school, you must, of course, do as you see fit.”

“There’s this thing called free will, Logan. I know you don’t like people to have it but some of us believe in emancipation.”

“I used to sleep in a bedroom up the hall from you, Frost. I know exactly how much free will you believe in letting Scott have when it suits you. He’s running off with Howlett it’s because you slipped his leash.”

And, yeah, possibly bordering on the irrational to blame Frost for not keeping better tabs on Cyke, but she knew Scott Summers, which meant she knew as well as Logan did that the last thing Cyke needed right now was touchy-feely lovey-dovey crap from some in-touch-with-his-softer-side Wolverine. It would have made a lot more sense to just sell him out to Sinister. That would have pissed him off and got him fired up and fighting back. The guy had been ready to give up much too recently to be able to cope with people being nice to him, especially people being nice to him who looked just like people who had used to be his friend.

Frost said coolly, “Don’t worry, Wolverine. I’m sure you’ll find a way to rearrange it in your head so you’re not to blame. You and the Avengers are past masters at ducking responsibility, after all.”

“Meaning?”

The full force of her blue gaze wasn’t necessarily something a man wanted turned his way. She
hadn’t turned into her diamond form, but it was like it was still visible somehow, under her skin. She was like one of Bobby’s ice sculptures, brittle and beautiful, and paralyzingly cold to the touch.

“Silly of me I know to suggest that perhaps the problem was never a different version of Wolverine being nice to him but the one Scott knew best being such a vicious, hateful, prick to him. Just an idea.”

He suspected every man in the plane except Magneto flinched a little as she spat out that hatred of their collective genitals. He realized that he was mad as hell with her but that if harm came to Emma Frost, it would gut him like the average handshake from Sabertooth. This woman was a pillar of blazing rage with him and the Avengers right now, barely held in; if asked she would probably swear on a stack of bibles that she wanted him dead; but the fact remained that he and she had been family, once, and you didn’t get to divorce your family, however angry you got with them. They’d lived too close together for too long. He probably knew better than Scott did that she had bought Scott’s shirts from Ascot Chang, and that cashmere overcoat she had made Scott wear to functions that made Scott look like a movie star – even more like a movie star than the clueless bastard usually did – had come from Brunello Cucinelli and had cost so much money that even Warren had been impressed. Just like he knew that Scott liked sweats for workouts, and uniforms for missions, and the rest of the time was happy to wear whatever, and that however good he looked in those very expensive clothes Emma had liked to dress him in, Scott never even bothered to look in the mirror before he headed out the door, except to check he didn’t have any spinach stuck between his teeth.

If the uncrowned king and queen of Utopia hadn’t been mutants with a higher cause to keep Emma occupied, if she really had been the vapid society hostess she sometimes pretended to be, she would probably have murdered Scott by now. Because although Scott had taught himself to get out there and shake hands and look people in the eye – even if they couldn’t reciprocate – and try to make the case for his species, without flinching: a Scott who wasn’t a member of an oppressed minority would have whined like a five year old about having to attend parties and meet society people and be a clothes horse for Emma’s taste, and been no kind of asset to her at all. He would have stood around awkwardly while knowing, bored, society wives, and vampish mistresses, and wide-eyed debutantes all tried to make breathy conversation with him, while Scott toyed with some limp white wine and tried not to look at either his watch or anyone’s breasts. Emma would have been forced to dump him for Tony Stark in sheer self-defense. The other women would have been on Scott like hyenas on a fresh kill while Scott was still mopily wondering why Emma had left him, and Emma would have regretted the exchange she’d been forced to make for the next decade even as she propelled Stark remorselessly towards the presidency, it hurting her like a knife under the ribs every time she saw Scott being uselessly decorative at the next party, the next controlling woman steering him from senator to senator with guiding jabs of her fingernails.

It was a very inconvenient moment, when Emma was sitting there, radiating adamantine fury with him, to realize that he still loved this woman like a sister-in-law, when he hadn’t noticed ever starting to love her in the first place. He had thought she was just something he had to put up with because Scott had chosen her and Scott really was family, and then somehow time had passed and she had bedded into the place where he kept the people that truly mattered to him. And now she hated his guts and he’d just helped lose her boyfriend and he realized that it truly would wound him if harm came to her. The timing for that revelation really sucked.

Stark was explaining how incredibly clever he had been and how complex had been the calculations necessary to extrapolate from a shielded heat signature the flight path of an invisible plane, not to mention the work he’d had to do running facial recognition software from all over the globe to get a match and then to cross reference it by the most fiendishly subtle back channels to obtain a name and a series of shell corporations for a business and a bank account and every single building associated with that name and those businesses and bank accounts, including the only one that matched their
current trajectory, which – in case no one was paying attention – only a genius could have obtained. And, incidentally, their destination was so far down the Andes that they were practically in Tierra del Fuego, and was almost certainly a secret hideout buried in the mountains that, going by the schematics, wanted to be a James Bond villain base of operations when it grew up; no obvious government connection as yet. Jarvis was probably the only one listening to that apart from Rogers, and that was because Jarvis was programmed to and Stark and Rogers were – again – pretty much married and just hadn’t noticed it yet.

Frost did enquire if any of the shell corporations Stark had waded through in his display of genius had ever had dealings with Stark Industries because she did like to know whether or not she was going up against Sentinels.

“You’re never going to let that go, are you?”

“You made money from making machines that have no purpose except to kill my people. No, trust me, I am never going to let that go. Not to mention that time when you wanted us all to register just for being born.”

Beast was saying pissily that it would be just like Scott to force them to have to sniff out a satrap of S.H.I.E.L.D.-infiltrating bad guys instead of just telling them that that was what they were dealing with.

“He knew we’d feel honor-bound to come after him once we realized what had happened but I resent being treated like a student being set extra homework….”

Logan would have liked to believe that; that Scott had got himself captured, just so they’d come after him with the full force of the Avengers therefore pointed at mutant-killers; but Beast wasn’t the one who had been grabbing the front of Scott’s prison jumpsuit when the guy had relaxed into the blades that were coming for him, like he had never wanted anything as much as death. Some part of Scott’s over-complicated brain might have offered it as a multiple choice option, maybe: And if the Avengers aren’t too stupid to grasp what happened and then, having worked it out, too callous to care, they might actually do something about the fact that S.H.I.E.L.D. got infiltrated by person or persons unknown who would hand mutants over to be murdered…. But that had been way at the back of his mind. Scott had seen a trap being set for him and he had walked straight into it because even dying in one of the truly terrible ways that mutants died when people who hated them got their hands on them was better than having to just sack up and live. I got sent to hell and then tricked into killing my kids, Summers! I had to drown my own son! Do you see me lying down and dying about it, you spineless son-of-a-bitch! He wasn’t certain that he’d ever been this angry with him. God, they could be vivisecting him right now…. Scott had told Logan he wasn’t to blame, even though it was spending time with Howlett that had pushed him over the edge, meaning this was about Logan, whatever Scott said.

Frost, who must have been following the same thought process or had just hijacked his, said coldly, “Don’t take it personally, Logan. Scott knows how adept you are at ducking all sense of responsibility for your own crimes. I’m quite sure he thought you and the other heroes around here would have any lingering guilt squared away with your consciences by teatime.”

Logan said tersely, “Frost do me a favor and go fuck yourself.”

He was aware of McCoy tut-tutting, and Stark and Rogers giving him a disapproving look because that had been so unchivalrous and ill-mannered, and Hawkeye and Natasha exchanging ‘Wolverine’s in a mood’ looks as she flew the plane, but when he looked across at Frost, he had to steel himself to do it because he’d just given himself away to the other person on the plane who knew Scott as well as he did. The anger had gone out of her eyes. They exchanged a look and she said much less icily, “So, you really didn’t know? I did wonder.”
“No,” he said,

“You should take it as a compliment, Logan, for a minute there I thought you might have been as smart as Scott.”

“I would never knowingly send him off to that!”

“You knowingly left him in a prison where he’d already been tortured and was going to be murdered, sooner or later. Excuse me for not realizing your ethics where Scott is concerned still have some boundaries.”

Rogers said, “Miss Frost, we didn’t get to choose the prison they put Summers in. We weren’t happy about it ourselves but we did have a few other priorities to deal with at the time – like the world nearly having been destroyed by Summers going Dark Phoenix, not to mention what Namor did to Wakanda. Logan went to see him.”

“Yes, and that was so sweet of him – except for the part where he went there to stab Scott in the heart.”

Stark said, “I went to see him.”

“To obtain the blood samples you subsequently lost. Just a suggestion, but perhaps the two of you might want to reconsider that career as prison visitors.”

Rogers said, still politely and reasonably, “Miss Frost, we didn’t bring about this situation….”

And Emma not at all politely or reasonably said, “Yes, you fucking did, Rogers!” in a way that ended all conversation for the foreseeable future.

Logan could have told Stark that he was wasting his time trying to impress Emma Frost with their superb efficiency in breaking into a villain’s secret hideout by a combo of stealth, strategy, and sheer superhero awesomeness. She’d been working with the X-Men for too long not to expect brilliant tactics and perfect timing and masterly teamwork, not to mention incestuous hook-ups, random time-travel, and people coming back from the dead. She might be mildly surprised that the Avengers weren’t as useless as she had been presuming, but that was the best Stark was going to get out of her in her current mood. They did indeed infiltrate the place without setting off a single alarm or figuring on one of the many security cameras, before making their way seamlessly to the subterranean vaults in which Logan’s heightened senses informed him that the mutant torture happened on a far too regular basis, and it was as they were making their way along the narrow stanchion used by service engineers to maintain the light and power fittings that Stark cast that hopeful look at Frost to see if she was even a little bit wowed by them.

Frost said, “Do we have an exit strategy? Because in this situation, Scott would have at least six in mind and back-up plans for all of those.”

Hawkeye, in a moment of revelation that must have been arriving on a slow boat from China, said, “My God – Summers was that dweeby kid in school who always did his homework on time and put his hand up to answer every question and asked for special assignments, wasn’t he? The little shit.”

“You only just got that?” Logan demanded incredulously. “Where the hell have you been?”

Still nursing ancient resentments, Hawkeye said, “When we’ve rescued Summers from the bad guys, I am so giving him a swirly.”
Frost said loftily, “I always thought of you people as the bullying jocks who used to beat up the smarter kids after school. How nice to have the confirmation.”

Rogers cast a repressive look at Hawkeye. “That is not who we are, Miss Frost. That is the exact opposite of who we are.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Captain.”

McCoy said thoughtfully, “I think of Scott more as the sort of kid brother that parents are misguided enough to inflict upon a family in middle-age; the type who was really quite lovable when younger but who makes your life a misery with his self-righteous pontificating the moment he reaches college age and starts believing that only he knows what is wrong with the world.”

Their position up so high on the stanchion, perfectly concealed behind the lighting gantries, with the evil laboratory in which the evil scientists no doubt did their evil work laid out so far below them, was not unlike being at the theater. All that was missing was the orchestra tuning up. Logan felt a sudden craving for snacks. There was even a program he’d grabbed from one of the corridors they’d made their way down so silently after Stark had reprogrammed all their security cameras to show footage from the previous hour. It was a leaflet put out by the people whose secret guests they had become. It was in English, with no Spanish translation, which made him suspect that the bad guys weren’t local, which, given the US government propensity for meddling in the affairs of South American countries made him think Secret Law-enforcement U.S. Government Scumbags. He had read the first paragraph already.

**The Mutant Menace: What Real People Need To Know About The Enemy Within.**

They can look like you. They can act like you. They can be living next door and you wouldn’t even know it. Their children can be attending schools alongside your children but they don’t have to register and no one needs to keep you informed. Genetic anomalies are among us and it’s time for the Non-Aberrant People Abiding Legally on the Macrocosm to fight back.

“No wonder your voice always puts me to sleep, Stark. Apparently you’re a Non-Aberrant Person or N.A.P.”

“Give me that.” Stark snatched it from him, read it through, and then passed it to McCoy. “I’m guessing the people who chose the acronym N.A.P.A.L.M. to designate all humans without an x-gene are probably not looking for a peaceful solution to inter-species conflict. It’s in English, I see, well, of a kind.”

“I notice they’re being coy about the name of their own organization,” McCoy observed, scanning the leaflet quickly. “Astonishing, though, how the language of paranoia and oppression remains so consistent throughout the ages. The Malleus Maleficarum would probably find a comfortable resting place in these people’s libraries alongside John Knox’s ‘First Blast of the Trumpet’, Mein Kampf, and the McCarthyist propaganda of the fifties.”

Stark said in an uncannily accurate representation of a crackly fifties politician, all crazy eyes and conviction: “‘Americans…! Don’t shop in mutant-run stores! Don’t buy evil mutant cupcakes! You can drive the mutants out of television, radio and Hollywood! This tract will tell you how!’ Now read on to discover how you need to be a bigoted asshole or else mutants will poison your children’s minds before your very eyes and in some unspecified fashion inevitably Destroy America!”

Amused, Magneto said, “Ah, the good old days. Don’t forget that as part of the fight-back against
unAmericanism one must oppose vaccination – particularly the polio serum – water-fluoridation, and care for the mentally ill, and never forget that everything that isn’t a Communist plot is a Jewish one.”

Stark said to Frost, “That reminds me – Summers is from Alaska, isn’t he?”

“Originally, yes.”

“And that was the state that thought it didn’t need mental health treatment facilities until decades after everyone else. You have to enjoy the irony.”

Magneto said, “Stark, in all your computerized trawling through back channels did you find out if these people have government support?”

“These people are clearly a rogue organization,” Captain America said firmly.

Logan didn’t know whether to admire his conviction or sneer at his lack of cynicism. “Or a secret government organization we’re just not supposed to know about,” he said.

“The United States Government does not snatch people off the street like common kidnappers and then subscribe to their torture.” As he became aware that everyone was gazing at him open-mouthed, Rogers shifted uncomfortably. “Well, not the Government I support.”

“Yes the Government you support,” Stark told him. “They all do it. They’re worse than Magneto’s old Brotherhood. No offence, Lehnsherr.”

Magneto said mildly, “None taken.”

“These clowns are getting funding from somewhere,” Logan growled. “That’s usually Church or State in my experience, and, too often, both.”

Rogers said, “The Canadian government may well still be funding mutant experimentation programs, of course, because they’re…like that, but I refuse to accept that the United States Government is engaged in acts of rendition against law-abiding.…."

“Summers isn’t law-abiding, Steve,” Stark said quietly. “He’s a wanted fugitive. That’s probably the point. They took a guy no one would miss. Well, no one except the hordes of irritating hippies who keep waving the guy’s poster in my face while calling me a tool of the establishment.”

“That was where these people were smart,” Rogers said. “They made sure the world saw us take Scott Summers into what looked like Avengers custody before they took him off our hands – and took him as far away as they could get him while staying on the same landmass. Whatever happens to him next, we’re the ones who’ll be left carrying the can for it.”

Stark cast a look at Frost. “Are you sure this isn’t just some convoluted plan of your boyfriend’s? Making us look like jerks is what he does on his days off these days.”

“Why would he bother when you’re such experts at making yourselves look like jerks? Or did you think bringing a bunch of heavily armed superthugs along to oppress children rescued from brutalization and bullets by bigoted policemen was going to play well on the six o’clock news?”

“We didn’t touch the damned kids! We didn’t even scold them for hanging out with wanted felons. If we’d known they were going to be with you we would probably have brought them donuts because that’s how nice we are. We were trying to arrest Summers.”
Frost sniffed loftily. “You brought a Hulk to a peaceful Australian suburb and then attempted to put on a particularly lame version of West Side Story.”

“We were not trying to start a rumble!”

“Quibble about semantics all you like, it was an absurdly aggressive piece of overkill and you deserved everything you got. In my opinion, Scott should have let Illyana block your toilets and rearrange your underwear drawers while you were time-bubbled like she wanted to.”

“Well, it would make a change from that creepy little girl you like so much throwing us into evil torturing Limbo prisons.”

“If you don’t like the way people behave when possessed by cosmic entities, Stark, try not dropping them on them.”

Hawkeye looked curiously at Stark, “Are you jealous that Emma Frost likes the Rasputin chick more than she likes you?”

“No. Shut up. I’m just saying it would be like Summers to have set this whole thing up just to make us look bad and get more people waving Cyclops Was Right placards in my face – which is very annoying, by the way.”

McCoy said, “Scott really ought to copyright his own image. Given how insanely popular he is with the unwashed and ill-informed, he’d clean up. You should get your lawyers to look into it, Emma.”

She sniffed again. “I already did. Scott won’t play ball. He says he’s not a product and he refuses to be trademarked.”

Hawkeye murmured, “Talk of the Devil.”

Logan looked down to see two burly thugs in white dragging a bruised, manacled, blindfolded Scott Summers under the ominously surgical looking lights. Logan lost his craving for snacks and the tension on the stanchion cranked up noticeably. On the up side, they were in the right place, Scott was still alive, and hadn’t been vivisected yet; on the down side, he already looked like crap, and those two guys weren’t exactly being gentle.

They slammed him down onto something that looked uncomfortably like a hospital table, and unmanacled him in readiness for strapping him down – which Logan could have told them was a move they would regret. They were both twice Cyke’s size and he had clearly already been roughed up, not to mention being effectively blind, but, still, there was never really any doubt about what the next ten seconds was going to look like. They were hulking great bruisers with muscles on their muscles and Scott…wasn’t. Unfortunately for them, they relied on being the biggest guys in the room, whereas Scott had chosen to rely on being an obsessively self-disciplined control freak who trained five hours a day, every day, in every kind of martial-arts technique, exactly for scenarios where bigger, tougher guys came at him when he was blind and manacled so he could practice every single conceivable method of bringing them down. He never lost focus, he never lost his temper – well, not unless the guy he was fighting was Logan – and there was nothing anyone could throw at him that he hadn’t practiced first and his muscle memory wouldn’t remember – it had been backed up so often – from footwork to headspace, because Scott, tragic no-life loser that he was, had practiced everything a hundred times over and then once more, just to be sure. And although Logan was in no way taking the credit for Scott’s obsessive no-life loserliness, he was taking credit for introducing the concept of ‘Sometimes you need to fight dirty’ to the Boy Scout. Scott Summers would never have gone for an eye gouge or a ball crush, even when his life was on the line, if Logan hadn’t drip-fed the concept of street-fighting into his prim little brain. (Ro might claim that she was
the one who had taught Scott to brawl, but she was wrong. Storm had never come close to getting Scott mad enough with her that he’d kneel an opponent in the groin.)

So, this was candy from a baby time and Logan just sat back and enjoyed it. The pity was that these lumbering muscle-bound slow-coaches were so outclassed that it was over in seconds; a swift foot to the face – bad guys never learned how supple Scott was until it was too late – followed by a fast elbow and a faster skull back-smash to follow through, and a perfectly executed backflip and he was behind them while they were still lurching from the blood in their eyes. He slammed their heads together like two great bells meeting and had sprung clear before they knew what had hit them, both of them felled like oxen by a guy literally with his eyes closed. Head cocked to hear the jingle of the keys, Scott shot out his bound hands, snatched them from the belt of the falling guard, and had the cuffs unlocked before the guy hit the ground.

Hawkeye said grudgingly, “Tasha would have done it more stylishly and in high-heels, but, okay, that was…moderately awesome.”

Unfortunately, Scott’s reward for that masterly display of balance, control, nerve, power, training, and general bendiness was eight more guys pouring in there with pain-sticks and truncheons, who surrounded him, beat him down, ran a current through him repeatedly, and then dragged him back to the table by the hair. Most of them were bleeding and two of them were walking funny by the end of the skirmish, but Scott was still very emphatically recaptured and, incidentally, unlikely to be topping any ‘favorite mutant in the building’ polls.

Logan, who had been in that position way too often in the past, growled, “This smells just like a government set-up to me.”

Sighing, Rogers said, “Not everything’s a conspiracy, Logan.”

Down on the stage, Scott had been strapped down on the table and his red-and-red spandex ripped to ribbons so electrodes could be applied to his bare skin. White-masked people, who had poured into the room as soon as he was secured, were spurting liquid from syringes in readiness for injecting him, while others made looming machines close by hum ominously as their lights and dials flickered. Every time Scott tested his bonds one of the guys with picanas hit him. Sometimes they hit him just because. The scientists seemed fine with that. Logan felt the rage flare start to lick up his spine and locked everything down, because he was not going to spring up, claws flexed, roaring from the chest, and fling himself down there to turn flesh into ribbons, because he was not an animal and Scott Summers was no longer his friend.

McCoy said tersely, “The other deeply annoying thing about unwanted younger brothers from whom one is estranged is the realization that one can never resign oneself as dispassionately as one might wish to the prospect of them being beaten up by vicious, bigoted thugs.” McCoy’s claws flexed on his blue fingers and his eyes glowed a deeper gold as Scott’s body jolted in response to the current from the picana. “I warn you all that I am this close to doing something mindless, violent, and deeply regrettable….”

“All we’ve learned so far is that these bastards are assholes. No one’s gonna be madder than Scott if we go bustin’ in there now.”

Rogers placed a restraining hand on McCoy’s blue, furry arm. “Just hang in there, Henry.” He went back to murmuring down the comm channel to Romanoff, on the plane, asking her to scan for heat signatures and active x-gene signatures. Her report was unequivocal: except for the laboratory where Rogers’ own signal was originating there was only one or the other. Live humans, dead mutants, no
combo of both.

“How many dead mutants?” McCoy asked tersely.

“Impossible to say. To be honest, there are so many signatures compared with how few mutants there are in the world, that I think we’re talking mostly tissue samples.”

Stark said, “Jarvis…liaise with Widow, get visual confirmation of what we’re dealing with here. We’re not leaving anyone here to be tortured.”

The visual confirmation came back all too quickly. A room filled with samples, blood, tissue, skin cells, organs, and skeletons that had originally been five mutants. McCoy could tell from the damage to the bones and the blood staining on them how some of the victims had died – slowly and cruelly seemed to be the consensus. They could only have been mutants for a few weeks and already they had been murdered for it.

Stark hacked into the building’s system with his teeth gritted. “I can start an electrical fire in that room and shut off the sprinkler system so it incinerates everything in there.”

“Put it in place but don’t execute yet,” Rogers said, also grimly. He turned to Logan, “Still think these monsters are attached to the US Government?”

“Cap, I’m fifty-fifty on it. I don’t have the same faith in the red white and blue that you do.”

“They do have that Paramilitary Thugs R Us look about them,” Stark said. “So, they could be rogue operatives or government funded, these days it’s hard to tell. If they are legit, I think we need to guess their catchy acronym. Given, S.H.I.E.L.D. and S.W.O.R.D. I’m guessing…S.H.E.A.T.H. because it really protects the multiverse. Now with extra ribbing.”

With commendable patience, Rogers said, “Whether this facility is government-funded or not, this is clearly not a legal interrogation, ‘enhanced’ or otherwise, and I consider us completely within our rights to break Summers out of here and remove him to a less clandestine facility where we can ensure that his human rights aren’t violated.”

“I hope that big needle’s going in his arm or that’s not the only thing that’s going to be violated,” Hawkeye observed.

As Rogers made to move, Logan grabbed his arm. “Wait.”

“Logan, I know you have issues with Summers. I have issues with him, too, but I’m not going to just stand idly by while the man is tortured.”

“Look, I’ve been on more missions with Slim than Stark drank frou-frou cocktails in his alkie playboy days…”

“Seeing as I clearly remember Cyclops and the other Xavier School spandex cadets being…twelve about five minutes ago, I seriously doubt that,” Stark put in. “Incidentally, I liked him so much better when he was too young to have all the hot women hitting on him.”

“If this was a mission for the X-Men, what Cyke would want us to do is hold off on rescuing him until we find out what these guys want and why they want it from him. And it’s middle age, Stark, in case you wondered, that’s why the policemen are looking younger too. And, yes, sorry to break it to you, Bub, but your ass does look big in that outfit.”

“Oh, we’re mocking my age now? Because that’s rich coming from a guy who celebrated his
bicentenary passed out drunk in a bar in bumfuck, British Columbia. And everyone’s ass looks big next to Saint Cyclops of the Eternally Clenched Sphincter down there. No man needs buttocks that firm unless he’s moonlighting as a high-priced escort – and I can get into the best parties without needing to do that just by virtue of being me.”

Hawkeye murmured, “Guy’s coming at me with a needle that size and damn right I’m clenching my sphincter…”

Logan held Rogers’ gaze. “Seriously, Rogers, we need to know what these jokers want from Cyke, and he’d want us to find that out before we break him out of here.”

“What they’re doing to him….” Rogers gritted his teeth as voltage bit into Scott’s bared skin and his spine arched in agony.

Logan wished Cyke would just go ahead and scream instead of choking it down because at least screaming took your mind off the pain for a second, but aloud, he said, “What, a little slap and tickle like that? Magneto used to do worse things than that to him before breakfast and they’re best buds now. That’s like a handshake to him. Trust me, Slim can take it.”

He could feel Rogers jibbing because, like Stark, he could remember Summers being a solemn teenager, and however annoyingly he had grown up, a part of him was always going to feel it was his duty to protect that boy from harm. Beast’s displaced time-refugees probably hadn’t helped with that. Impossible to see Scott writhing on that table down there and not get unpleasant flashes of that new, shiny, wholesome Scott, back at the school. But this wasn’t happening to that nice unbroken boy, this was happening to Summers, who could indeed take it; could take just about anything these days because practice made perfect. (And, yes, if any bad guy laid a torturing hand on that boy, Logan would snap it off at the elbow and make him swallow it before ripping it out through his viscera, but this version of Scott Summers had a decade of hard road between him and that boy, and this was nothing Cyke hadn’t been through a score of times before.)

“Don’t be taken in by the whole Disney Prince thing he’s got going on – Cyke’s way tougher than he looks,” Logan added. “The guy has a freakishly high pain threshold.”

“Much as my very being revolts at agreeing with him, Logan’s right,” Emma said coolly. “Scott would want to know what it is these people brought him here for.” She did, however, flinch as Summers’ spine arched again as the current jolted through him. Logan awarded himself a mental point, because he didn’t even clench his fists.

“I can’t watch this,” McCoy said tersely.

“Suck it up, Hank,” Logan retorted. “These guys went to a lot of trouble to grab a high-powered mutant they didn’t think would be missed, and super-secret torture facilities give me the hump. Let’s get some dirt on these people we can use. You know if we could ask Scott that’s what he’d want us to do.”

“I might find that more convincing, Wolverine, if I did not have the sneaking suspicion that you’re only okay with acceding to Scott’s wishes when they coincide with him being brutalized.”

Logan let that one fly right by him because it wasn’t even true. He wasn’t enjoying this and he wanted it to stop every bit as much as Hank did. Thumping Scott himself, yeah, that he was up for, but watching someone else do it this messily – not so much. “You know I’m right. This is the guy who let himself get killed, revived, and tortured half to death for a tactical advantage – people experimenting on mutants with this kind of money behind them? Scott wants those guys taken down way more than he wants his next fifteen minutes not to get a little ugly.”
Ugly was a good description of the next ten minutes; and they got uglier when the two guys Cyke had laid out came back round, missing teeth, broken noses and all, and wanted payback; but when that time was up the scientists stepped in and it was clear that the softening Slim up part of the proceedings was over and they were now getting started on the Q&A. You could learn a lot about an organization by the kind of questions they asked, and Logan hadn’t needed Natasha’s input to learn that one.

“Tell me about the Avengers, Summers?” The scientist checked Scott’s stats as he asked the question, seeking a baseline, Logan suspected, for what was probably some kind of polygraph-come-pain-level-monitor.

“I hear Wikipedia is an excellent resource.”

Logan did flinch at the punishment for that but he kept his claws in and he didn’t think anyone saw his reaction. The scientist seemed pleased by the spiking needle that dutifully recorded Scott’s agony.

“Tell me about the Jean Grey School For Higher Learning.”

“Again, I think their prospectus can be found online.”

That time when the heavy punched him they all heard bone crack. Frost, to her credit, didn’t give an inch, but McCoy had a blue-furred hand to his face and Cap was just hating it. Stark and Barton were on emotional lockdown, damned if they were going to admit that this was getting under their skin.

“Tell me where you and your revolting gene-deviant group are hiding out?”

Scott said, still evenly, despite the blood running from his mouth: “We really must get around to putting up that website.”

The questioner nodded to the heavy to hit him again, unnecessarily hard, then leaned over Scott and said, “I think you almost enjoy this, Mr. Summers. I think it’s familiar ground to you. I think being tortured for information you won’t give up has become your comfort zone. I’m going to take that comfort away from you.”

“You’re going to make me lie on a sun-lounger and read a good book instead?” Summers grimaced at the inevitable retaliation, spat out another well of blood and said with a sigh, “Why is it that mutant-hating agents never do want to force us to drink mai-tais on Waikiki Beach? Have you guys ever even considered how effective that might be?”

“An excellent question,” Frost said.

“Ironically, for Scott that probably would count as contravening the Geneva Convention,” McCoy murmured. “Forced inactivity gives him a serious case of the jitters and he really does hate beach wear.”

Hawkeye and Stark exchanged an interested look. Logan could practically see their brains working. “Really?” Stark said. “You mean we could torture Summers by making him chill? Deny him his daily workout, lock him out of the Danger Room, and sign him up for surfing lessons? Because I’d be up for that.”

“No sit-ups, no push-ups, and enforced daytime television – including infomercials?” Hawkeye looked positively orgasmic at the prospect. “We could make him eat junk food! Guys, this needs to be our next mission – force Summers to become a couch potato for a month and deny him all fresh vegetables.”
Logan said, “Okay, I have issues with Cyke, but that’s just sadistic.”

They learned the name of the place and its tortuous acronym – Stark had been right that of course it had to have one – when the chief scientist, who had evidently been watching the proceedings on a monitor, came to explain how the machine worked. It was impossible to see much of him behind the surgical mask, but he didn’t look South American either, he was slug-pale with fine reddish hairs on the back of his hands, and colorless eyebrows, barely visible. The voice behind the mask was undoubtedly American, but too generic to suggest any particular State. A few minutes listening to his terminology and Logan suspected these guys’ funding might be coming from Nazi gold.

“We here at L.I.M.B.O. . . .”

“This isn’t Limbo,” Summers said, annoyingly. “I’ve been to Limbo. This isn’t it.”

The scientist looked a little red around the ears. “I’ll have you know, you distasteful genetic anomaly, that this organization has been in existence for decades.”

“Well, the real Limbo’s eternal.”

“The Lodestone Indemnified Mutant Brig & Observatory has been working to prevent A.G.A.s for more than –”

“I’m sorry, do you have a particular grudge against heavy-frame slow-burning ranges?”

They all winced as the scientist basely snatched up the picana and jammed it into Summers’ red-and-black bruising side.

“A.G.A.s are atrocities by genetic aberrations! L.I.M.B.O. exists to protect innocent homo sapiens against them!”

“And is your organization indemnified against us or against the consequences of abducting us, experimenting on us, and making us disappear when you’re done with us? Because, naming your organization ‘Lodestone’ when your purpose is mutant murder and there’s a man called Magneto in the world may leave you less indemnified than you think . . . .”

As Scott had to break off to choke down a cry of pain, Stark said, “Just as a matter of interest, does Summers always go out of his way to annoy bad-tempered men holding unpleasant implements?”

“Generally, yes,” Logan admitted.

Frost buried a ‘Pot meet kettle’ under an unconvincing cough.

Hawkeye said, “He did notice when they cracked his ribs, right?”

McCoy took off his glasses and made a show of cleaning them although everyone knew he was just making sure what was being done to Scott on that table was out of focus. Sighing, he said, “Possibly not. Scott is very good at repressing non-essential information until after the mission. He can stumble over the corpse of an incinerated baby and not puke until he gets home, so a few broken bones in non-weight-bearing places might not even register.”

They listened to the usual paranoid spiel about how mutants were taking over the planet and responsible for all of its ills, and how L.I.M.B.O had been waiting their chance to grab Summers since he had proven himself to be unstable, powerful, and dangerous, three very good reasons, in L.I.M.B.O.’s eyes to ensure that he was captured, interrogated, and neutralized. First, however, they intended to make him the recipient of their latest experiment, one specifically matched to his DNA –
obtained from a handy blood sample from that halfwit Stark – which would ensure his total cooperation whether he wanted to give it or not.

“Did that guy just call me a ‘halfwit’?” Stark demanded in disbelief. Everyone hushed him.

Rogers said, “Miss Frost – can you ask Summers to ask the people questioning him who their contact is on the inside?”

It was weird, because Logan was almost sure that Frost had been about to confess something she really didn’t want to share with them, when Cyke said, “So – how exactly did you pull this off – bringing me here?”

The scientist looked smug. “Let’s just say there are sympathizers within S.H.I.E.L.D. who wanted to see you in our custody.”

The same Summers who couldn’t work out why Jean had wanted to slap him when girls who had been blatantly checking him out on the beach for hours asked him for help putting on their suntan lotion and he idiotically consented, got that the bad guy here was obfuscating even faster than Logan did, and his mouth did that annoying little smile thing that had driven other men to want to pop a claw through his eyeball in the past.

“You have no idea who’s been helping you, have you? And you didn’t break into Stark’s place. You didn’t even arrange the fake I.D. Tell me, did my blood get left in a call box for you or just arrive in a refrigerated parcel?”

The scientist angrily gestured to one of the heavies to hit Summers some more, which the guy did, repeatedly, but at the end of it, Scott just spat out the blood from his cut lip and said, as if he had never been interrupted, “There’s a reason why we have proverbs about looking gift horses in the mouth. The Trojans learned that one the hard way.”

“Don’t try to bluff me that your team are with you, anomaly. No one set us up. We captured you.”

“If I were an anti-mutant sympathizer and I was going to give an anti-mutant organization a nice present, I wouldn’t give them me. I come with a lot of baggage and I have some very scary friends. In fact, I’d only give you me if I was someone who disliked the X-Men and the Avengers and anti-mutant organizations equally and had found a quick way to screw them all over with one play.”

Rogers turned to Logan. “Is he bluffing or is he right?”

“Both, I’d say. Sounds like Cyke’s fishing for information but he’s probably got things straight. My money’s still on Mystique for their secret ally, she doesn’t give a shit about Summers getting sawn up for spare parts and she would happily screw all of us over – but she’d also bring down these guys, however many X-Men she had to throw under the bus to do it. In which case, S.H.I.E.L.D. may have a hostile shapeshifter problem.”

Down below, the evil scientist was still rebutting Scott’s words: “…you’re not an X-Man any more, Summers. All you are now is a wanted criminal. None of the X-Men care what becomes of you.”

“Did you really think the non-sympathizing parts of S.H.I.E.L.D. would be okay about you taking their name in vain? Trust me, Maria Hill is going to be tetchy about it. And when she gets tetchy she tends to call in the Avengers, and the Avengers stomp people like you before breakfast.”

“The Avengers don’t give a damn about you either and they’ll never be able to trace us here,” the scientist said comfortably.
“The Avengers may not give a damn about me but they give a lot of damns about people infiltrating S.H.I.E.L.D. and making them look bad, and, please, Tony Stark will be able to find you people in fifteen minutes plus flying time. Less if he asks Henry McCoy for help. You’re an amateur outfit and someone has told you I’m your ticket to the big leagues. But I’m really your worst nightmare. You’re just not smart enough to have realized it yet.”

The scientist drove the picana viciously into Scott’s broken ribs, while one of the heavies backhanded him and another scientist sadistically ran more current into his pain-racked body through the electrodes.

“You won’t be feeling so clever once we’ve tried out Serum Seventeen on you, anomaly, and you’ve told us all your secrets. By the third dose, there will be nothing you and your gene-freak friends have ever done that won’t be known to us.” The rest of the conversation was just the guy cursing Scott out with all the common mutant slurs.

Logan and Emma exchanged a shrug, because they had heard it all so many times before, but Rogers looked shocked to the core. He had obviously never come across any anti-mutant graffiti on his travels.

Stark said, “Seven minutes to find you, actually, Summers, and I didn’t need McCoy’s help just because I accepted it. And, Logan – how much more of this are we supposed to sit here and watch because being an Avenger doesn’t usually involve just breaking out the popcorn while people are getting the shit kicked out of them?”

It was Magneto who said, “They have a secret weapon which they want to try out on Scott. The question is whether we choose to let them. I suggest we come to an agreement on that matter as soon as possible.”

Frost said tersely, “If they’re expecting him to be alive for them to administer the third dose to him then presumably it’s non fatal – although that doesn’t mean it will be pleasant for him. I think we both know that Scott would want to know what it did and for us to obtain a dose that has been synthesized in the system of a subject with an active x-gene so we could start working on an antidote.”

“If we trust their science,” McCoy put in. “Although I admit I do want to know what their secret weapon is because it seems to be a considerable step up from sodium pentothal. I’m just not wild about the idea of mutant-hating madmen getting to use Scott or anyone else as a guinea-pig.”

They argued the point in whispers: Magneto was against on the grounds that he didn’t hold with experimenting on live subjects, especially when the people doing the experimenting were Nazi sympathizers; Emma, cutting to the chase as always, said that Scott would want to know the worst in case it could be used to target other mutants; Stark admitted that both Logan’s healing factor and McCoy’s still evolving mutation made them worse test subjects than Scott, with his one, relatively stable mutation, that hadn’t changed much since he was fifteen, but that these people were clearly assholes and therefore probably sloppy scientists, and it would make a lot more sense to take their serum and run the test on him in laboratory conditions if Scott really wanted it done.

“No offence, Stark, but neither you nor McCoy would be the doctors he would choose,” Magneto pointed out. “He would far rather put himself in the hands of Doctor Rao.”

“Well, she isn’t here and we are – and even Summers would have to admit we’re a step up from the Mengele triplets down there.”

“Why don’t we just ask the guy if he wants us to pull him out or let things play out a little longer?”
Barton demanded, nodding to Frost.

A look of brief panic washed over Frost’s features and then she got up and walked a little way away from them, evidently trying to make contact. When she came back, she said, “I can’t get through to him. Something must be blocking my telepathy.”

It was Rogers, the one with the mind the most like Scott’s, who said, “If this is a fact-finding mission, we don’t know what their secret weapon is yet. If it’s a rescue mission, we are risking Summers’ health by letting them begin the next stage of their interrogation. I’m willing to listen to other opinions because I recognize that Summers has his own affiliations. So, those of you with closer ties to him than me, which is it?”

“It’s both.” Logan knew he’d have to be the one to point out the obvious, because everyone always did make him be the bad guy. “We find out what they have up their sleeve, and how it works, and then we go down there and we take it away from them and rescue Cyke so Stark can run his tests on him. And anyone who thinks Scott Summers would want us to pick any other option, is kidding themselves.”

“This isn’t his mission,” Rogers said tersely. “He’s the subject of it, not the man running it.”

“Sure about that, Cap?” Hawkeye countered. “So far, he’s the only one who seems to know what’s going on. And is it my imagination or was that mad scientist guy right, and Summers has pepped right up since they started smacking him around…?”

Logan hated to admit it, but Scott did look and sound a lot more like himself now he was back in the familiar scenario of being tortured by bigots. It was as if that other dimension had left him threadbare, and a good old-fashioned interrogation had solidified him again. Beside him, McCoy seemed to have come to the same conclusion, given that: “Not enough therapy in the world…” that he was murmuring sadly as he shook his head.

Logan looked pointedly at Frost. “Well, that one time Slim signed up for therapy it didn’t turn out too well for him – what with his therapist using it as a method to telepathically jump his bones.”

Frost said loftily, “Like you wouldn’t jump his bones in a heartbeat if you’d ever got half a chance. Always supposing you didn’t already in Japan.”

“What?” She had managed to shock him with that, not with her disdain, but with the underlying note of hurt. “I never slept with Scott in Japan.”

“He was willing to do anything it took to kiss and make up with you. I read that in his head, loud and clear.”

“We had a few beers,” Logan protested. “He drank more than he wanted to and stayed up an hour later than usual to pacify me, that’s all. We didn’t even have a meaningful conversation. Frost, this is Scott we’re talking about. It’s not like he has any social skills. He just hung out with me for a few days to see if I wanted to either talk to him or punch him to make myself feel better about Kurt.”

“But it worked!” And although it was whispered fiercely it was from the heart. “When you came back you were getting along again. I was sure he’d let you….”

“So, because you were okay about tricking him into letting you fuck him telepathically, you thought I’d be okay about emotionally blackmailing him into letting me fuck him physically? I’m not you.”

Frost said very quietly, “There’s a tarry black hollow in the center of your soul, Logan and it matches the tarry black hollow in the center of mine. And the real reason you think you hate Scott so much
right now is because you know it’s there, inside you, and you know, even after everything Scott did when he was possessed by the Phoenix, that it isn’t in his soul, because, even with Charles Xavier’s blood on his hands, he’s still a better man than you can ever be.”

If she’d said it with hate, he could have dismissed it, but she said it sadly, like it hurt her too, and it stole his breath away. He opened his mouth to say something angry and then saw her gazing down at a tortured Scott like it stabbed her even to look at him, and remembered her crying in his arms because Jean had shown her who she really was and it had been unbearable.

He said, “Darlin’ – you and me, we’re just us. We don’t have to measure ourselves against anyone else. Not Jean and not Scott. If we’ve made more mistakes than most people maybe it’s because we’ve lived more difficult lives. Banner’s the one who says that all you can try to do is balance the scales.”

“Balance them how?”

“Try to do more good than harm. And do you really think, even for a second, that you haven’t done Scott more good than harm over the years? Hell, if Jean had known how you were going to take care of the guy, she would have had him gift-wrapped for you with her dying breath.”

Emma said, “Sometimes I wonder if she did. If that’s all there ever was between us – Jean passing him onto the next powerful telepath because she didn’t think Scott could survive without a strong woman looking out for him. It would have been just like her, wouldn’t it, Saint Jean the Eternally Martyred – always ready to sacrifice for the greater good?”

Hawkeye hissed, “Did it never occur to you, Logan, that if Frost had just hooked up with Summers’ wife instead of him, and then you’d hooked up with Summers, there would probably have been a lot less needless drama?”

“We’re X-Men, Hawkeye,” McCoy said wearily. “Needless drama is what we do best.”

Rogers said, through gritted teeth, “I’ve had just about enough of this as I’m willing to take.” And it was ironic, given that Rogers would – and had – signed up for way worse, as long as he was the guy enduring it, but watching it being done to Scot was playing on his last nerve. Logan knew exactly how he felt, he was just damned if he was admitting it in public.

“Five more minutes, Cap. Let’s just find out what these creeps have got up their sleeves, then we can gut the bastards and get Slim out of there.”

“Wolverine, I was with you up until ‘gut the bastards’….”

McCoy seemed to have been following the science part better than Logan had been. He said, “As far as I can make out from those rather distant computer screens, they’ve done something to the blood samples they stole from Tony’s lab and seem to be intending to inject them back into Scott. At least we know it’s the right blood type, and their storage protocols appear to be both sterile and efficient… Tony, can you make sense of those central equations? Some of them appear to be alchemical.”

“It looks like Victor von Doom’s area of expertise to me,” Stark said, squinting to make them out.

Hawkeye said, “Are we talking pentagrams and chicken feet here? Because if they’re turning Summers into a zombie, I’m against it.”

“My too,” Logan put in. “I hate frickin’ zombies.”

“Zombies are hardly famous for their garrulous characteristics and they definitely seem to believe that
this procedure will make him more talkative. Hmm, the equipment looks standard for any transfusion. I just wish we knew what they’ve done to Scott’s blood in the interim….”

Down below, the scientist was still looming over a strapped-down Scott.

“You’re familiar with telepathy, of course?” the scientist said smugly.

“Well, the last three men who were my legal or illegal guardians and the last three women I was romantically involved with were all telepaths but apart from that, no, not at all. Please do tell me all – Ah!”

“He kinda asked for that,” Hawkeye conceded.

Stark hushed him and pointed to the mad scientist leaning over a strapped down Scott. “I know that expression. That’s Supervillain Gloat Face #36. If you shut up, we’ll be able to hear him spilling his evil plan.”

What happened next seemed to Logan to definitely be edging into mad scientist territory. The shithead down there in his evil laboratory of evil was indeed explaining what happened next to Summers like he’d taken Bad Guy 101 and aced Advanced Gloating, but it sounded like so much junk science to Logan. It was no surprise to have the Nazi connection confirmed though.

Stark said, “Why do these guys always spill all the details of their evil plans before they press the big red button? Don’t they know that inevitably leads to evil plan failure? Do they just not go to the movies?”

“His evil plan doesn’t even make sense. Telepathy isn’t a virus,” Logan said. “It’s an ability caused by a mutation. You have it or you don’t, right, Frost?”

She said, “Sometimes you have it and you don’t.”

He guessed she meant when kids carried the gene for it but hadn’t reached puberty so it hadn’t manifested yet, but she sounded oddly wistful. It was worrying Logan that Scott believed it. He could tell that by the rigid body language, that was how well he still knew him, at least on this, Scott was doing rapid damage control, the way Jean had taught him, walling things off in the places in his brain where even the most intrusive telepaths couldn’t easily find them. He was concentrating on it with absolute and unwavering focus, but there was really no need because this was bullshit, right?

Logan said, “Those dicks down there can’t just turn Scott into a telepath and then force him to hit ‘transmit’ so they can learn all his deepest and darkest secrets. It doesn’t make sense.”

Stark and McCoy were exchanging looks as they mentally checked the science. McCoy said, “Of course, by that method the subject would have to already have an active x-gene….”

Stark said tersely, “Using freaky amulets they found in secret Nazi museums to create temporary secondary mutant powers via Satan-worshipping black magic is sloppy science. Unfortunately, looking at those equations, it will probably work just fine.”

“Too late to stop it now in any case,” Magneto said crisply. And Logan saw that he was right. The serum had already been loaded into the machine they had Scott wired up to and the plunger had been depressed. Scott’s red blood cells were being pumped back into Scott’s veins.

McCoy said pensively, “What I don’t understand is how they’re achieving any level of control. If they’re truly using Scott’s mystically altered blood injected back into him to fool Scott’s x-gene into believing that he is now a telepath with no power to prevent himself transmitting his every thought,
where’s their volume control? And, given Scott’s life up until now, what mental shielding are they using to protect themselves from…?”

That was when every heavy and white-masked scientist in the laboratory started screaming and clutching at their heads.

Stark said disbelievingly, “They didn’t…check out the guy’s life story before they decided they wanted the full sensurround Scott Summers Total Immersion Telepathic Experience? Because that seems kind of dumb now.”

McCoy said, “Now would seem like a very good time for Captain America and Wolverine to remove Scott from the vicinity while Stark and I steal all their data and Emma gives us telepathic protection from Scott inadvertently setting our brains on fire and then undoes what they did to him.”

“I…can’t….”

Logan really thought she was screwing with them for a second until he looked and saw the panic in Emma Frost’s blue eyes. She recovered her aplomb but there was a tremor under her voice all the same: “This is a mystical virus and I don’t have any defenses against it. I can’t help any of us.”

If Rogers had to stop and think before regrouping he did it too fast to be visible to the naked eye: “Magneto – go and grab Summers. With that helmet on, you can get closest to him with the least psychic trauma. Stark and McCoy secure the data. We’ll secure the building.”

Logan said, “No, Cap, we won’t. We get Cyke and we get the data and then we get out of here and we leave these scumbags to S.H.I.E.L.D. to mop up. Mengele Wannabe down there said the telepathic pulse would increase in intensity. If it gets too bad, Romanoff isn’t going to be able to fly the plane.” He thought it showed how he’d grown as a person that he didn’t suggest blowing up the building with all the L.I.M.B.O. sons of bitches still inside it. He did however add darkly and in a way that allowed for no possible argument: “And – Stark – burn their data, their tissue samples, and their stored DNA. Burn it all.”

It had gone like clockwork because, frankly, they were really good at this, and even better when their opposition was rolling around on the floor screaming. Logan realized that the idiots had no experience with telepathy at all, not even the flimsiest kind of mental shielding, and had never even had a voice in their heads until now, never mind a non-telepath transmitting a whole projectile vomit of horrendous trauma. The mind adapted to being around telepaths, it learned its own volume controls and vertical holds, found ways of dealing, but it took time, and these guys and their tender virgin minds had just been violated by the equivalent of a telepathic chainsaw. Only the thought of how much those scientists and thugs were currently suffering and how that would stop if he killed them enabled Logan to keep his claws in, but when he stepped over one who still had Scott’s blood on his knuckles, it took all the self-control he had not to just lunge.

Rogers methodically handcuffed everyone, told Hawkeye to help him – and Logan to stay away from the prisoners, that was an order – while Magneto, bravely, pulled off the helmet offering him protection and put it over Scott’s head. For a few seconds there was blessed relief and then Scott started screaming in agony.

“New plan!” Logan yelled, but Magneto had already whipped the helmet off – Scott, stopped screaming but swooned palely against Magneto. (Even in the midst of chaos, at the sight of Scott limply nestling against Magneto’s bosom, Logan felt an inexplicable growl trying to escape from the back of his throat. He choked it down but turned on the machine used to monitor Scott’s pain levels
and drove his claws into it savagely.) Magneto, supporting Scott, put the helmet back on his own head, gathered Scott into his manly arms and headed for the plane at a swift and steady stride. Given that Scott was now unconscious, Logan waited for the images cramming their way into his mind with all the subtlety of a cattle stampede to switch off. They didn’t.

Stark and McCoy were downloading all the data they could find while gabbling things over the intercom to Romanoff and then scrambling the system behind them. Hawkeye was helping Rogers immobilize the prisoners – Hawkeye being considerably more vicious about it than Rogers, Logan noted with pleasure – while Romanoff was a steady stream of sanity in the ear explaining why the shielding they were asking for probably would block a telepathic signal quite effectively but would also stop all her instruments from working so unless they really wanted to fall out of the sky, a new idea might be good.

As he cuffed the big guy who had hit Scott the hardest, Hawkeye kicked him in the ribs saying savagely, “Oh I’m sorry – I do hope I didn’t hurt you, you shit-shoveling waste of a human life.”

Rogers said, “Avengers don’t kick men when they’re down, Barton.”

Stark deliberately stepped back on the hand of the wailing chief scientist who had administered the serum to Scott and ground down his heel. “Turns out, sometimes they do.”

Hawkeye kicked the other big bruiser to turn him over as he wailed and thrashed so he could cuff him too. “These guys are mutant-killing pond scum, Steve. If you knew how much effort it was costing me not to put an arrow in their heads you’d give me a medal.” He flinched as the carousel of crazy images kept spinning through their minds. “And can someone make Summers stop doing that!”

“I know it feels like there’s a horror movie running in our heads but all Slim’s doing is cranking out memories,” Logan pointed out as he drove his claws into the next bank of machines for the pleasure of watching them spark. “He can’t damage our minds, only gum ‘em up with unwanted data. It’s a lot more survivable than a plane crash. We need to suck it up.”

Rogers used the scientists’ equipment to inform Hill of what had just happened so she could lock onto the signal and find their secret base that much more easily. She wasn’t happy about being played. Indeed she was so very far from happy that it warmed Logan’s heart to think of her storming towards the captive L.I.M.B.O. members in a mood comparable to the wrath of God just before He unleashed the ten plagues of Egypt. Then, despite the fact that being this close to Scott in his condition was not unlike having red hot needles jabbed into the brain while being trapped in a movie theater running twenty-four-hour torture porn, Logan did feel a certain amount of satisfaction, as Stark and McCoy’s big science brains threw themselves at the problem of Scott’s telepathy spew only to have to admit Logan was right. They all needed to suck it up.

McCoy and Stark had made Scott as comfortable as they could on a hospital gurney at the far end of the main cabin while they hooked him up to machines and a whole bunch of drips, inserted a catheter so McCoy could monitor his urine output and color – Hawkeye cringed at that point – ran tests, and complained about the way they weren’t able to lift his eyelids to shine lights into his eyes as they would have done with anyone else. They had to settle for carefully undoing the brutally tight-buckled blindfold and easing it off while Emma handed over a ruby quartz visor for them to put on instead. (Logan noticed that Emma didn’t hover over Scott the way she had done in the past. She smelled just as anxious and angry as she did when he was hurt on other missions, but she made herself walk away and stare fixedly out of the windows of the jet, uncurling her fingers when they instinctively bunched into fists.)

Stark kept waving home-made meditech devices over Scott and tut-tutting about various things he was unhappy about while McCoy assured him that Sinister hadn’t stolen Scott’s DNA for nothing;
Scott might not have Logan’s healing factor but for a man without it he healed incredibly well and no way would a few cracked ribs and a nasty case of multiple contusions even slow him down, let alone do him any lasting harm. He covered Scott in cooling sheets of his own design, for lowering his temperature, while scolding an unconscious Scott for getting himself in this condition, while Stark said that on second thoughts, letting the test play out had clearly not been one of their better ideas…. But even though they could monitor Scott’s blood pressure, heart-rate, pulse-ox, kidney function, and brain wave patterns, and could run a score of tests on his blood, it wasn’t telling them anything Logan couldn’t have told them with one sniff. Scott was in the grip of a spell and was running a high fever. Also, the telepathic emissions from him were building in intensity and they really needed to step away from Scott and get themselves over to the other side of the cabin….

Another ten minutes and Logan knew the intensity of the images at that distance must be unbearable. He’d been about to tell them to move or he’d make them when Emma said shortly, “Stark, do you want to start bleeding from every orifice? Move away from Scott before he scrambles your brain or I’ll think that mad scientist was right to call you a halfwit.”

Magneto added, “You’ve taken the blood samples for analysis of the serum he was injected with and you’ve done all you can for Scott. We all know it’s just a case of letting the mystical fever burn itself out.”

As Stark’s nose started leaking crimson, Rogers said crisply, “Do as they say, Tony. Now.”

McCoy and Stark backed up unwillingly, and, yes, cut and bruised and wearing rags, stuck down the end of the plane on that hospital gurney, with tubes going in and out of him, like a sacrifice on a dais, Scott looked young and battered and vulnerable. It wasn’t as if Logan couldn’t see that, too, but they didn’t need their two geniuses to get mind-scrambled in solidarity with Scott; that would achieve nothing except to lower the collective IQ of the plane.

“He’s running a fever of a hundred and three. We were trying to get his heart-rate stabilized and I think we’ve succeeded but I don’t like his inter-cranial pressure. His blood pressure’s still all over the place. In fact everything on his chart is zig-zagging,” McCoy said. “There’s already some respiratory depression so, although he could be in a lot of pain – which is not going to help with his blood pressure – I can’t administer any morphine until I know it’s not going to make his breathing worse. There is Naloxone on board but once you go down a path of having to keep offsetting one drug with another….”

“Hank, this is Cyke,” Logan pointed out. “We both know that, under that pretty-boy surface, the guy’s made of old boot leather – and he’s come through way worse.”

Stark was also staring at a handset glumly. “And he does have the advantage – much as I hate to admit it – of having been a model of flawless physical fitness to start off with. There are pre-schoolers with higher cholesterol than his. Someone definitely needs to force feed Summers some junk food.”

“Jarvis is monitoring Summers’ condition remotely and feeding all the data into your handset,” Rogers said steadily. “If his stats start spiking, no one is going to stop you attending to him, but for the moment you’ve done everything you can.” He glanced around at them. “I think we all know this isn’t going to be pleasant. Let’s try to get through it as calmly as possible.” He gave Stark a straight look and added in an undertone: “Tony, put on the suit.”

“No.” Stark poured himself a drink and refused, stubbornly, to make eye contact.

“Tony…” Rogers best coaxing voice but Stark was still throwing out the body language of a difficult teenager.
“No. Not when the rest of you don’t get to duck this. Not unless Summers needs a medic and no one else can get close to him. No.” Anyone who knew him at all knew he wasn’t budging and Rogers gave up with a sigh.

Hawkeye, clutching his forehead, while Romanoff, wearing Magneto’s helmet, piloted them expertly away from the evil lair of evilness, said, “Seriously? That’s the best you two Mensa men can come up with? Can’t you just seal off that part of his brain temporarily or something?”

McCoy said, “We don’t yet know how this spell is working. It could be accessing his suprachiasmatic nucleus to hack into his circadian rhythms and effective getting him to ‘dream’ his entire life, hence the rapid speed of events, or it could simply be acting like a computer virus that accesses all his memories at once. Either way, I think you’re wildly underestimating the complexity of the human mind. The Atkinson-Shiffrin memory model has been largely discredited as being far too simplistic. Short-term memory is stored in the frontal lobe, but long-term memories are first routed through the hippocampus and then stored all over the brain, meaning that –”

“Is that a yes or a no, McCoy?”

Stark said impatiently, “Barton, we’re dealing with an already damaged brain that just got mystically screwed with to act like a transmitter. I mean I could jab a corkscrew in Summers’ frontal lobe and twist it and your headache would probably go away but I’m thinking ‘man up and be damned grateful it was Cyclops’ brain that got hacked and not Wolverine’s’ is still the better option.”

McCoy said, more patiently, “Anything we attempted to ameliorate the effects of his temporary telepathic transmissions could damage his already traumatized brain. His body effectively has to reject the mystically enhanced bloodcells and flush them out of his system, which we’re quite sure it will, and we’ve given him everything we have that will speed up the process. But by our calculations it’s still going to take three to four hours for the blood they injected him with to get winnowed out through his own bodily filtration systems, at which point his fever should drop and the spell will effectively end, leaving him, I trust, unharmed. Incidentally, Tony is quite right about the Wolverine thing. I have no desire whatsoever to find out how it feels to be either vivisected or to have molten metal run into my body while I am awake to experience it.”

Hawkeye said, “What about trepanning…? One little hole in his skull? He’ll barely even notice it…?”

Rogers said firmly, “Absolutely not. And no one is convinced by your ‘he probably needs a lobotomy anyway’ theory.”

“Find me an X-Man that doesn’t?” Hawkeye retorted, eyeing Logan.

Logan smirked at him. “Lobotomies don’t take with me.”

McCoy darted back over to Scott to adjust the angle of the gurney minutely, before hurrying back to them, while Logan, trying not to flinch from the confused montage being beamed into his brain, asked if he was now opting for the feng shui approach.

“I’m avoiding another feedback loop – that’s what happened when Erik put the helmet on Scott’s head – the transmissions couldn’t escape so they bounced back into his brain. A few more seconds and his head would probably have exploded. I want to make sure he’s got plenty of space around him so that doesn’t happen again.” McCoy flinched as they all got hit with how it felt to be possessed by the Phoenix, Scott’s feverish thoughts swinging wildly away from that back towards Jean rising out of the water, alight with unearthly flame. Dead Madelyne. Dead Jean. Then a swirling loop via a confused and sickeningly painful jolt back to Dead Xavier.
“Well, isn’t this jolly?” McCoy said tersely, sitting down where he could watch Scott’s stats on his hand-held monitor, while putting a hand up to his furry blue head.

Logan’s temples were throbbing painfully and he gritted his teeth as Scott’s fever-fuelled mind took off on another bad road trip back down memory lane. Everything Scott felt, they felt, everything he saw, and smelled, and touched, and heard, they got to experience just as fully; which meant the world kept coming at them in a confusion of red horror stories. Being the Phoenix was like being on a switchback ride, only faster, crazier, and even more sickening. Nothing made sense. There was panic and rage and fear and confusion. There was that damn arrow hitting home. There was the terrifying feeling of someone else clawing at their mind, trying to shut it down, and the raging flail back against it. All of it jolting from clarity to blackout to confusion to images out of the past that had nothing to do with the rest. Jean and Emma and Paris burning….

“I am going to throw up if I have to do the firebird shimmy again,” Hawkeye warned. “Summers? Summers, you mental case…think happy thoughts!”

McCoy, watching his brainwaves on his handset, said in surprise, “He’s responding to aural stimuli. It might be possible to influence him. He said he had a good time in that other dimension, didn’t he? It may indeed be possible to steer him towards as Hawkeye puts it ‘happy thoughts’….” He darted back to where Scott lay, leaned over him and said slowly and clearly: “Scott, think about the place where you were with Hercules and Howlett and Young Kurt.”

Logan said, “Hank, that might not be the best idea you ever –”

They were in a red-dripping hell, lakes of fire burning, black rock soaring, sharp as obsidian, enmeshed in a hydra’s tightening tentacles. And there was Howlett, blue eyes alight with excitement as they threw blazing torches to one another and hacked off angry snapping heads. Scott seemed to be having the time of his life.

“Being groped by a tentacle monster – not a big improvement if you ask me,” Hawkeye said through gritted teeth. “Oh…or being groped by hog-man-beast-things. Or a handsy minotaur. Or those screechy things with wings…or a frickin’ enormous snake! This is his idea of a good time? Because the guy clearly needs to get laid….”

Logan said urgently, “That is the last idea you wanna be putting in his mind right–” Too late.

They were in the biggest bed Logan had ever seen, sandwiched between Hercules and Howlett, with everyone slippery and naked and incredibly friendly and oh hell Howlett was gonna….

There was a collective wince and Romanoff who was evidently monitoring them in case they went insane and had to be saved from themselves, turned around in the pilot seat and said, “What just happened?”

Stark, pouring himself a drink with a certain rigidity of posture, said grimly, “Trust me, you don’t want to know, but…turns out Summers’ sphincter does occasionally unclench.”

“Nothing like enough,” said Hawkeye bitterly.

“Just be grateful Frost took the stick out of it first.” Logan refused to flinch as Howlett initiated Scott Summers into the love that dared not speak its name with considerate but deepening thoroughness.

Stark handed Logan a beer bottle as he made his way back to his seat and Logan took it with a grateful nod. This was definitely an experience better cushioned by alcohol. He looked across at Emma to see how she was coping with the revelation that her boyfriend had cheated on her with a
different dimension’s Logan but she might as well have been in her diamond form, she was so unreadable. As he watched, she brushed some imaginary dust from her knee but other than that, not by a twitch of one fingertip did she reveal that she was hurting. He resisted the urge to applaud.

No one made eye contact with anyone else as the scene sped up, Scott’s breathy, strangled gasps feeling as if they came from their own throats, his surprise at being swept along by so many sensations curiously innocent. Logan was absolutely refusing to find that touching, he was too busy being mad as hell.

McCoy said, “This is a terrible invasion of his privacy…."

“Screw that,” Hawkeye said shortly. “It’s me being invaded that’s bothering me – because I don’t actually do…that on my vacations. Jesus, Summers, you tight-assed freak… No! Don’t let Hercules ream you as well. The guy’s hung like a fricking…! Fuck!”

Stark was trying to minimize his flinches as Hercules pushed in to the hilt then began his majestically demigod-like thrusting. Gritting his teeth, Stark said with an air of forced nonchalance, “Okay, fess up. Who ordered the rectoscopy this morning? And particularly who asked for it to be performed with a cocktail shaker?”

McCoy said, “Most anodyspareunia is believed to be psychological in origin. And we need to bear in mind that we are not simply experiencing Scott’s memories; we are, in our turn, inevitably interpreting them according to our own personal filters, leading to an unavoidable disconnect between his version of reality and our perception of it. Some people, for instance, therefore, perceive anal sex to be painful, when in fact…."

“Give it up, McCoy,” Stark retorted. “Psychobabble it all you want, no one on this plane – except weirdass Summers, who apparently enjoys having really large objects shoved into really small places – is going to be sitting down comfortably for the next month.”

Clenching everything, Hawkeye said, “I hate Hercules so much right now. The only person I hate more is Summers for being such a slutty manwhore.”

Steve Rogers said, “Avengers don’t slut-shame, Clint.”

Hawkeye said, “Watch me.”

Stark snorted. “Yeah, sorry, Steve. I’m with Barton. I’m slut-shaming Summers to hell and back when he wakes up.”

“And, I swear to God, if he let anyone fist him over there, I’m putting an arrow in his head…."

Logan didn’t fight it. Fighting both sex and telepathy tended to just make it hurt worse, so he let it happen, but he was furious with Scott all the same. It had been one thing to smell the proof on him, it was another to actually witness and experience it. Scott had given it up so damned sweetly. There was nothing Scott wouldn’t have let those two do to him. They could have put their fingers around his throat and squeezed and he would have let them strangle him.

As Scott writhed pleasurably between two muscled-up, hairy men, their fingers and mouths all over him, wailing softly as Hercules’ cock kept a steady, prostate-pumping rhythm, Stark said, “Who knew Goody-Two Shoes Straight Arrow Summers was such an easy lay?” He cast an appraising look at Rogers. “What about America’s other famous Boy Scout? You hiding a secret life as a filthy strumpet as well, Steve?”

“Try not to sound so hopeful, Tony, dear,” Emma suggested.
Logan was kissing his own throat, being kissed by his own mouth. He had no idea how Scott could be okay with that beard tickling his skin, but Scott didn’t care, he was too busy making those needy little moans as he arched his back to meet Hercules’s deep thrusts and turned into Howlett, clutching his shoulders as his tongue lapped at Howlett’s chest, clinging and craving like Howlett was everything he’d ever wanted. The bottle broke in Logan’s hand and the beer ran frothing down his fingers, right on cue.

Rogers crossed over to where Scott was tossing feverishly on the gurney, confused images flashing in and out of their heads in crimson zig-zags, while that gay porn channel ran in the background. Rogers leaned over him and said intently: “Summers – listen to my voice. This is Captain America. Think of the Negative Zone….”

It worked in that the scene abruptly shifted – and the transitions were such awkward lurches that they were making Logan seasick – but Hawkeye wasn’t the only one who yelped. Getting Hercules’s horse-cock up the ass had not been Logan’s idea of fun, but at least there had been foreplay, lubricant, and those pleasurable sensation spikes from the prostate to offset the discomfort; this was definitely worse.

“What the hell, Cap…?”

“He said he was fine,” Rogers retorted, flinching manfully as the pain intensified. Clearly, Scott had omitted to mention that while in the Negative Zone he had been suffering from the world’s worst headache. Logan’s vision was zig-zagging like the vertical hold had dropped out of his red-shaded world and the urge to puke was overwhelming.

“‘Fine’ in Cykespeak just means he’s not coughing up blood yet,” Logan explained tersely. “Now can we exit the Negative Zone before we all pass out?”

Rogers’ voice triggered another memory and they reeled from the pain of being concussed in the Negative Zone to being concussed on Utopia by a blow from Captain America’s shield.

Stark staggered sideways and glowered at Rogers. “As Summers should have said to Howlett: watch where you’re putting that thing.”

“I was trying to knock him out before things escalated. I wasn’t trying to…injure him.”

“It feels like you fractured his skull,” McCoy retorted.

“If I’d fractured his skull he wouldn’t have been able to coordinate the battle against us. The problem was my not hitting him hard enough.”

“The problem was you not respecting the sovereignty of Utopia, being in any way willing to negotiate, and charging in like gangbusters instead of letting us handle things,” Emma said icily.

With a hand to his head, Stark said, “I kind of hate you, too, right now, Steve, just so you know.” He turned to Frost. “Emma – this isn’t the time or the place for that discussion and I think you know that. What’s done is done and even if we wanted to, we can’t undo it. Pretty please, for all our sakes, get your boyfriend to start thinking about something nicer than being groped by hell-beasts, or having a brain-bleeding migraine.”

For a moment, Logan thought she was going to make them beg, but then she walked over to where Scott was lying, pressed her lips to his temple and then whispered something in his ear. As the scene changed, they all gave a collective sigh of relief.

Logan suspected it might hold Scott for a while but then he would start looping back through all the
horrors and headaches again, dragging them along with him, marlin-spiked to his past traumas. He suspected the next three hours were going to define ‘interminable’.

THREE HOURS LATER…

“Is this guy ever *not* concussed?” Hawkeye wailed, clutching his throbbing head.

Barton was getting close to hysterical, Logan noted with interest. The guy must have a very limited spectrum of sex-life for Howlett, Hercules, Madelyne Pryor in her darker incarnations, and Emma Frost on any given Wednesday to come as such a shock.

“Look who’s talking, Barton,” Emma retorted loftily. “Every time I see you, Henry’s shining a light in your eyes to see if you still have any higher brain functions left.”

Logan admired the way she was carrying this off. Everyone in the room now knew what it was like to have sex with her – and how – not to mention to have sex with her ex – and they knew he was her ex now, because that had slipped out in one of Scott’s churning montages of self-hatred – and she wasn’t giving way with a twitch of an elegant fingertip. Logan was shocked that Scott and Emma had broken up, himself. He’d never seen that coming. Scott had taken a piece of the Void into his own brain to keep it out of hers. She’d carried her own severed arm around because she wouldn’t leave him to face Sinister alone. Who the hell could make a go of it if these two couldn’t? Then he remembered thinking exactly the same thing about Scott and Jean; even clouded with jealousy as he had been, he’d never doubted that they truly loved each other. He didn’t know if he should envy Scott for having the kind of love that would put itself through any hell for his sake, twice, or pity him for having had that and lost it with two different women.

It wasn’t the sex that was bothering him – apart from the sex with Howlett – it was the other stuff; not just Scott thinking Logan was a potential rapist, which was bad enough and not something he thought he would ever get over, but Scott still thinking of Logan as family. Logan flinched as a memory of his own voice came back to haunt him.

“S’funny. Before joinin’ this group…there wasn’t a scrap I couldn’t claw my way out of solo. That much ain’t changed… But it’s comfortin’ to know I got friends…family even…coverin’ my back.”

And that warm, unhesitating assurance from Cyke: “Now and forever, Logan. Whether you want it or not.”

The fact that Scott could be walking around thinking simultaneously that Logan probably *did* still want to kill him and *might* want to rape him and *undoubtedly* hated him, but that this did not, in any way, impact on Scott thinking of Logan as family whom Scott would still throw his own life away to save made Logan want to stab his claws into something and start ripping. And not just because that said a lot about what fucked-up orphan Scott Summers defined as family, but because Scott had a nasty habit of being right, and although Scott had always maintained that Logan knew Scott better than Scott knew himself, Logan had always thought the same in reverse. So, that meant that he probably still thought of Scott as family, too, and he wasn’t free of him. He would never, in fact, be fuckin’ free of him, probably not even when the guy was dead. He wondered if half of Henry’s resentment came from the same source, that he could bitch about Scott all he liked but he couldn’t actually alter the fact that he and Scott were eternally linked.

Logan poured himself something stronger as he glowered across at the man sweating palely on the gurney, being the absolute essence of his annoying self, by managing to screw everyone over, friend and foe alike, even while just lying there quietly with his eyes closed behind his visor. Scott
Summers was still under his skin, itching away, and even if he ripped his skin off with his metal claws, and watched it grow back again, the itch would remain, Scott would, maddeningly, remain.

Stark winced as they all crash-landed into a memory of being tortured on the Breakworld again. “Someone change the record!”

“Happy thoughts, Scott,” McCoy said rapidly. “Think of something nice.”

Hawkeye said, “Great idea…let’s all get banged by Other Wolverine again! I know I enjoyed that the first twenty times. Incidentally, my ass and I really fricking hate you now, Logan.”

“No extra charge for the orgasms, Bub,” Logan said.

Yeah, he was not giving way in a room full of overwrought people who had all been mind-raped by Scott Summers’ mind-rape, but, damn, was he angry about that. Scott Summers, untouchable, unbreachable, I-repress-therefore-I-am, Scott Summers, who swanned around like a spandex-wrapped statue with his perfect body and his perfect bone structure and his small-enough-to-cup-in-a-man’s-hand perfect ass cheeks, who had never so much as looked Logan’s way, who gave off the vibe that he was as out of reach as something behind glass in the goddamned Louvre, had been grateful for a pity fuck from hairy-assed Howlett. Logan wanted to put his fist straight through the wall, but he wasn’t giving Frost the satisfaction, any more than she had given him any when she had to experience her ex-boyfriend giving it up so sweetly to her rival’s doppelganger.

Scott was so yielding about it. He hadn’t been that yielding with Logan about…anything, ever. Literally anything they wanted, and Scott had bent and stretched and spread himself to accommodate it. He would have let them do anything to him, however much it hurt, and still thought of them as the best of men. He had all but slave-boy role-played for Hercules – Logan wasn’t saying he would have liked that himself but it might have been nice if Scott had offered from time to time instead of just tossing out the orders. While Logan had saved him from inevitable hideous death a dozen times and got less crushy eyes than Howlett had just for saying his name with kindness. Of course, that was another thing – Howlett had gotten to look into Scott’s eyes any time he wanted to, even while he was shoving his dick….

Logan must have growled because Stark said, “And, again in English, perhaps, for those of us who don’t speak Caveman…?”

Howlett doubled them all over again, right there on the bed, so their ridiculously long legs were hooked over his massive shoulders at the knee, a tender arm around their shoulders, holding them up to be kissed, because they were now so tall and slim and flexible that this didn’t even crush out the orders. While Logan had saved him from inevitable hideous death a dozen times and got less crushy eyes than Howlett had just for saying his name with kindness. Of course, that was another thing – Howlett had gotten to look into Scott’s eyes any time he wanted to, even while he was shoving his dick….

“No normal person can bend like that!” Hawkeye protested. “And why the hell would you want to be lying under a guy who weighs that much? And you need to diet, Logan!”

“It isn’t me, it’s the adamantium,” Logan retorted.

“It’s the fricking beer and you know it.”

Stark threw down another glass of something amber that was possible ginger ale. “Look on the bright side, when the next person – as is inevitable, given his people skills – tells Wolverine to go fuck himself, at least he’ll actually know how that feels.”

“So do I,” Hawkeye said through gritted teeth. “I know it forever. Damnit, Summers! You are twenty years late for some therapy!”
“You do know he’s not gaslighting us on purpose?” Frost said frostily. “Scott’s the victim here.”

Howlett was still thrusting and Scott was still letting him; making soft submissive noises, pretzel-twisted body as relaxed as a cat’s. And Stark was right about one thing, Logan could feel his own balls rhythmically slapping against his own ass; except he couldn’t bend like that, not the way Scott had, unafraid of that adamantium bulk pressing down on him, because he trusted Howlett, trusted him completely.

Stark said, “Oh yeah, I can tell he’s really suffering. All those orgasmic whimpers are a total giveaway.”

Logan flipped the top off another beer bottle and chugged it down, needing the yeasty bitterness more than ever as he had to smell his own sweat and taste his own tongue; trapped in the head of a Scott Summers who was inhaling that man with his face needily while a strong arm pulled him in deeper and his calves rubbed against Howlett’s hairy shoulders with every tender thrust.

Hawkeye was still bitching, like a radio play someone had left on even though no one was really listening anymore: “His life is insane! His memories are insane! His sex-life is even more insane than everything else! What’s the matter with you X-Men anyway? What is all this horror movie shit all the time? Don’t you people ever just go out for pizza?”

Emma said, “Oh like the Avengers stay in every night doing the crossword? You people die like regular people get paper cuts.”

Rogers said mildly, “Perhaps the next time I suggest that letting scientists experiment on people with dubious serums is a bad idea, everyone might listen to me.”

“Steve, you’re the poster child for scientists experimenting on people with dubious serums,” Stark pointed out. “You’re like the walking rebuttal of your own argument there.”

Hawkeye said, “Baldneto needs to get Summers back to a time and place where people are just dragging him around while he passes in and out of consciousness and tries not to puke, because I really need a break from all the crazy women in his life and their whips, chains, and strap-ons.”

Frost said, “The Madelyne Pryor you’re talking about was a psionic ghost, corrupted by demons and trapped on the astral plane, seeking a way back to the earthly realm. She bore very little resemblance to the perfectly ordinary woman Scott married, who was just another averagely annoying redhead.”

“Who says I was talking about Wife Number One, Miss Why Don’t We Try Another Little Experiment, Darling?”

“Oh please, Barton. Everyone knows that sleeping with me by proxy of Scott’s telepathic virus is the best sex you’ve ever had by a comfortable margin.”

Hawkeye retorted that if he was required to spend that much time with his mouth between a woman’s legs every damned night he would expect something more in return from it than her doing invasive things to him with insufficiently lubricated phallic objects.

Romanoff turned around in the pilot seat with interest. The approving look she gave Frost made Logan wonder if the Widow was going to be asking Frost for specifics later on what sex-aids she generally favored. Aloud, however, Romanoff said that it sounded as if more men should be following Cyclops’ example, not less, and the world might be a better place if they were.

“I’ve been saying that for years,” Frost observed languorously.
“How does he even have any feeling left in his tongue after all that…?”

“Can we not discuss Summers’ sex-life, Hawkeye?” Rogers demanded. “It’s bad enough that we are all invading his privacy and that of Miss Frost and the other people with whom he has been romantically involved. We don’t need to exacerbate the situation with tawdry commentary.”

“The tawdry commentary is the only thing getting me through this,” Stark retorted. He didn’t, however, everyone couldn’t help noticing, put on the suit.

“We could always go back to the Negative Zone,” Logan suggested, not at all helpfully, because if he was suffering then so should everyone else, damnit, and no one else was having to watch Scott Summers put out for a man who looked just like them after never once coming close to suggesting that he could put out for them. “I’m sure Cap can get us there if he says the right trigger phrases.”

“No! No! That headache was even worse than the others. Will one of you mutant mindcrawlers just find psychoclops a goddamn happy place?”

Logan shrugged. “Sex with Hercules again it is then….”

Emma said, “Pax Utopia!” like a magician throwing a dove into the air to see where it would fly.

Logan had a brief moment to hope for a happy memory before Norman Osborn punched him in the face – at least now he knew exactly how wounds felt when a man didn’t have healing factor. He was being beaten bloody on Utopia – at least it wasn’t by Logan this time – not being stabbed and raked by his own claws. Osborn had lost it, well beyond crazy eyes, with a slick line of spittle shining in the sunlight as he dragged Logan around by his ripped costume, screaming his fury at his refusal to back down, while slamming energy beams into him like he could never bleed enough to appease his rage.

“Cyclops really is Mr. How To Win Friends and Influence People, isn’t he?” Stark observed, holding his ribs as the beams slammed into him.

McCoy said, “This is where he and I parted ways.” He still sounded bitter; Logan didn’t think McCoy had a way of being with Scott that wasn’t bitter; they’d wounded each other too deeply somewhere along the way; but he sounded regretful as well.

Flinching from another brutal Osborn beatdown, Hawkeye said, “Didn’t the screwed-up son-of-a-bitch ever just…have Christmas?”

McCoy said, “He was raised in a fake orphanage by a madman who liked experimenting on him, Clint. I don’t think Sinister bothered much with gifts under the tree.”

No, Sinister had been much more about taking the boy down to the basement to brainwash him, and there had been nothing about it that hadn’t been skin-crawlingly creepy. The worst part being that the same Sinister, who had been unhealthily obsessed with the bodily fluids and mental make-up of that helpless little kid, was way creepier with the adult Scott than he had been even with the helpless little kid. Every time they had a flashback to Sinister caressing grown up Scott and telling him what a pretty mind he had, Logan felt an overwhelming urge to shower.

No way was he sharing that with Teen Slim. ‘Hey, kid, you know that worst nightmare you’ve managed to suppress behind all those mental blocks. Guess what? He’s still out there and even more obsessed with you, only, now you’re all grown up he doesn’t just want to separate you from all your loved ones and anything approaching a support system to see how screwed up he can make you, then torture you in the basement by trying to make you control your optic beams, no, now he kind of
wants to lick you too….’ There were some things that nice boy just did not need to find out about yet.

Still clutching his head, Hawkeye said, “You like screwing around with time, right, Hank? So go back and grab Summers before the goddamned plane crash. Just bring him here in his jammies and we’ll all tell him bedtime stories, and buy him teddy bears and candy, and then he’ll grow up sane, and normal, and we can get out of the twisted Escher sketch he calls a brain!”

“More of a Florentine hell fresco, surely?” McCoy murmured. “The red tones are particularly reminiscent of….”

“Shut up, McCoy!”

Rogers said thoughtfully, “If you just ignore the nightmare childhood and the repeated capture and trauma and sex and torture parts, the way his strategic mind functions is fascinating. There’s such… purity to his tactical thought processes, and the less time he has to think, the more perfectly that part of his mind produces one potential solution after another. It’s quite beautiful really.”

Stark and Hawkeye both glowered at their fearless leader. “Yeah, Steve – no one cares,” Stark assured him.

“ Mostly because their asses hurt too much because of Cyclops being a whore.”

In a voice like ice cubes clinking into a glass, Emma said, “Such a pity we couldn’t take you on the magical mystery tour of Laura’s memories, Hawkeye. Her past would make Scott’s look like a day with the Hardy Boys.”

Holding his own head, McCoy said tersely, “Erik, I would be very much obliged if you could do as Hawkeye suggested and nudge Scott in the way of one of our earlier missions. You smacking us around for the exercise would seem positively wholesome by comparison with this.”

Magneto obligingly rapped out something threatening, like the dad in Poltergeist scaring the little girl away from the light, and Scott gave them a Magneto montage in which the man was sometimes a terrifying opponent, sometimes an unknowable ally, handsome, enigmatic, and apologizing for past beatings, and sometimes just another father-figure whom Scott would never be able to please.

Logan let it all wash over him because his mind had adjusted well enough that he could make sense even of the sickening interludes when Scott’s feverish brain rapid-fired out images with the subtlety of shrapnel. He was pretty sure the questions the chief scientist had asked Scott had been meaningless, chosen just to establish a baseline for when he was lying or obfuscating, but Scott hadn’t taken the chance. So, what he’d been doing while he was waiting to be injected with magical nazi telepathy serum was throwing everything he knew about the location of the New Xavier School, the Jean Grey School, and the Avengers mansion behind impenetrable barriers and then sealing them away for safekeeping. Every now and then, his tangled mind would whitewater raft its way close to one of those places and everything would go black as his mental defenses kicked in and let nothing pass. There would be a sickening switchback jolt and they’d be carried off to some other horror, but without a single glimpse of any of those buildings. It was an impressive feat of mental control, although no more than Logan would have expected of him. What got him under the ribs was his own reaction – how touched he was, after everything, that Scott had put so much effort into keeping Logan’s school and Logan’s schoolkids safe. That, however, was just about the only upside to this particular experience.

At first it had been like being flailed by a mind-mace: sensations and images and emotions all tangled up together, like squirming fish in a net, not made any easier by the way Cyke’s mental telemetry
mostly came in crimson. (Howlett, of course, the fucker, got to appear in color.) Then Logan had got better at paring the meat from the bones, separating one tangled info-dump from another, teasing them apart and beginning to stack them like poker chips, in matching columns. Phoenix flashes there; prison memories there; Breakworld, fuck, that hurt, memories there; Jean, lots of Jean, lots and lots of Jean, her death evoking a stab of anguish in Logan that then got overlain by Scott’s grief, until it hurt too much to bear, no, he wasn’t enjoying the Jean flashes, and he doubted Emma was either; but the poker chip pictures were building.

The crazy kaleidoscope one that came with that great tearing gob of anguish: that was Scott’s brain still trying to repair its Xavier murdering movie reel. Logan could pick those pieces out a lot faster now. Lot of missing frames there. Lost time? Blackouts? At least the Phoenix ones were easy to sort from the rest, coming as they did in every color of crazy, and, the closer Scott drew to his final freak out, the more weird flashes and confused jumps there were. He didn’t know if that had been Scott in there or the Phoenix, all he could tell was that it didn’t feel or look the same as the reels where the Phoenix wasn’t riding shotgun in Scott Summer’s utterly fucked up head.

And, damn, he was no one to talk, and people who’d strayed into his mental cavities, said the experience had been not unlike finding themselves in the kind of crazy house where ghosts and serial killers threw themselves parties, but Scott’s mind was a mess. He suspected it hadn’t been spring-cleaned in a while, perhaps Emma had taken over housekeeping duties from Jean, and shoved the childhood traumas to the back of the closet, dusted off the victory trophies, thrown a comforter over the really ugly parts so Scott didn’t have to look at them every day, but, since those bozos had gone in there with their stolen serum, and started emptying all the boxes, this looked like someone had taken every kind of crime that carried six to twenty, cut it up into shiny sections and then tossed it like confetti. The black bug room wasn’t even the worst of it, although he had to say, Madelyne Pryor Redux, what a piece of work.

“Will someone, for the love of God, make that one stop?” Stark demanded, voice rising an octave.

Crisply, Emma said, “Grow a vagina, Stark, you sissy. It isn’t real. It was an illusion created by Dead Wife Number One to screw with him.”

“I don’t care if it’s real or not, she is literally screwing with him,” Stark retorted. “Which means she’s screwing with me, too, which makes this about the fiftieth time today someone’s shoved something in my ass I didn’t ask for. Make him think about something else!”

Logan could have told Stark straight off that those were not the words to use to get Emma Frost on your side. And those two were supposed to have dated? Frost leaned forward and purred, “Scott, dear, don’t think about Madelyne any more, or those depraved and filthy things she made you think were being done to you in that disgusting place she put you in…”

They all flinched as the volume got turned up, Scott’s panicked flailing behind it, which Logan suspected was hurting Emma more than the rest of them, as this was as much on her as on Stark and his whining. She toughed it out, though, glance flickering a dismissal over Stark, as if they hadn’t been naked together more than once.

“I’d ask if you’re really such a stranger to a little rough pegging, Tony, dear, except I know that you’re not.”

Stark would probably have made a snappy retort but he was too busy squirming with pain.

It was left to Hawkeye to yell: “Every woman in your life is a fucking headcase, Summers! No wonder you started having sex with men!”
“That’s hardly fair, Clint. Jean was always very considerate to Scott in bed.” McCoy held up his glass to Frost in salutation. “And it’s not as if most of the sex with Emma wasn’t extremely pleasurable also – and, in her defense, experimentation is what drives the human spirit to new discovery. Or, as Evgeny Morozov put it: ‘As any artist or scientist knows, without some protected, even sacred, space for mistakes, innovation would cease.’”

“How about a man’s ass being a sacred space for a change?” Hawkeye yelped as Madelyne got inventively nasty.

Stark grabbed the nearest bottle and gulped some down without even bothering with a glass. Logan rode it out. He was getting better at telling the difference between telepathic mindfuckery and the real deal, and this didn’t have the solidity and sheer visceral skin-scrape of an actual event.

Still, no shortage of imagination on Madelyne’s part. Showing Scott horror, a black, peeling cavern in hell’s basement where all the mutant children the Purifiers had murdered were screaming for help that didn’t come; their souls being shredded by razored claws, thinner and thinner, bleeding thin gold lines of hope. Everyone Scott had ever loved tortured in Hieronymous Bosch hell-horrors, racked and spiked and branded and burning, while he couldn’t get to them, shut out by slamming studded doors and twisted portcullises. Locked out by buttons lighting up whose colors he had to be able to see to press the right sequence while everything was red, red, red, and every time Scott got it wrong, a headsman brought down his axe or lit a green-wood pyre beneath the feet of someone else he loved.

It was almost a relief when Madelyne got bored with playing Scott’s despair like a violin sonata and reverted to straight up sadism, letting her whip wielding leather-masked dominatrix side out to play. Even as Logan was flinching – because, yeah, that was uncomfortable, having that done, and the cat-o-nine-tails and the chains and the…thing from the shadowy corner with the black leather mask and the tusks, what it was doing now, where it was dragging him, the things it had waiting, the place it was doing it in and the things it was doing…you’d have to be way more of a masochist than Cyke was not to be hating what was to come – still Logan wondered how much of this had been in the Madelyne Pryor Scott first met. How much of this was Sinister and how much the Goblin Queen and how much that nice normal woman they’d all liked? Would she have stayed sane if Scott had stayed faithful or was she always carrying this amount of crazy even before abandonment and demons had done their work? Had Scott been running away from the darkness he sensed inside her every bit as much as he’d been running back to Jean? Or had he made Madelyne this the same way he’d made Logan the man he was today by being such a fucked up piece of work himself?

Logan winced as Scott screamed in his mind, begging Emma for help, because he was in hell, in hell, and saw her turn a flinch into a wrist-flick of gin and tonic, straight down the throat.

Impossible not to feel grateful to the Emma of the past as she moved in, performing telepathic triage, her voice a beacon of crisp calm, as she restored sanity and order. There was a collective sigh of relief as Past Emma unmanacled Cyke from the hell Madelyne had left him in, unlocking them all in the process, and soothed his fevered brow with a kiss.

“Owe you one, Frost,” Hawkeye grunted, letting out a painful breath. “Oh no, wait, I don’t, on account of you doing sick, twisted things to me in bed for the past three and a half hours.”

“There are people who would pay good money to have Frost do those things to them,” Stark said. He sounded as if he might be one of them.

“Yeah, those people are called masochists.”

He and Stark were definitely taking it the hardest. Steve Rogers might be a Boy Scout, but he wasn’t
a whiner, and he was getting through it, constant concussions and every bad guy’s bondage fetish and sticky sweaty threesomes and traumatic childhood flashbacks and depraved telepathic sex torture and all, as stoically as Logan would have expected.

It was weird, though, seeing himself through another man’s ruby quartz filtered eyes, particularly when the Logan trying to leaf through this unwanted photo album found his reactions at odds with the guy delivering the images. That didn’t look ugly to Cyke, that snarling, frothing look? The emotion that accompanied the snarling Logan montage was generally resignation, not repulsion, and hardly ever rage, although on the occasions when Logan had got him to rage it had been a lot like he imagined it was for Howlett getting him to orgasm – impressive on the fireworks front and leaving Logan feeling smug. But generally Cyke sucked it up a lot, the martyred bastard. There had certainly been some very unwelcome revelations, one in particular was going to stay with him for a while, but even during the darkest of them Logan still looked a lot more handsome in Cyke’s mind than he ever did to Logan in the bathroom mirror.

And it had been no shock at all to learn that Scott thought Logan was misguided and unreasonable, or indeed an asshole. One who had retreated to his shiny new school like a wounded animal to his burrow and stopped taking any wider responsibility to protect their species. Scott was practically wearing that opinion like a t-shirt every time they met up. No surprise either to learn that Logan had disappointed him when he had failed to grasp the importance of letting Hope join with the Phoenix, and disappointed him again when he would not forgive Scott for a crime Scott felt Logan already knew Scott had not truly committed when Logan had been so quick to acquit himself of ones Logan truly had. And was disappointing him further every day when he didn’t go out there and offer himself as a human shield between new mutants and the dangers that oppressed them, the way Scott and his crew of ex-villains were doing.

It was, however, a considerable shock to discover that Scott, as well as thinking that Logan was a hypocritical jerk, also considered Logan to be a proud and lonely animal, cruelly isolated by his immortality, yet capable of true nobility, deserving Scott’s gratitude for his past willingness to sin-eat for their salvation, upon whose strength of character, courage, and bloody-minded determination Scott had long relied upon, and whose friendship he missed, acutely, every day. Logan had absolutely no idea what to do with that revelation. He was too busy reeling from it.

There was a moment when Scott, getting up from that vast bed in which he’d spent that happy, sticky time with Hercules and Howlett, had passed in front of the huge ornate mirror on the wall. The glass was flawless and Logan was reminded again that this wasn’t Ancient Greece Scott was in but a place in which the myths were real and therefore looking glasses could be as perfect as anything found in eighteen century Venice. Scott had seen his own reflection and stopped, in surprise, because it was a while since he’d seen himself without the visor on and his reflection was less familiar without it.

Logan had got to look into his brown eyes, the ones Jean had always found so beautiful, and thought that he looked less impressive and more vulnerable without the trappings of red quartz confidence. There was the same chestnut hair spiking down towards his right eye, revealing that it was as unruly as ever when not swept under his costume. The girly-long lashes that Scott was probably relieved people couldn’t see normally or else they might mock him for them. The body, admittedly, was flawless, even when bruised, he might as well have been a statue come to life; every hollow and plane of him looked so sculpted. Scott wrinkled his nose at his reflection and tried to tidy his hair with his fingers, scratched irritably at his stubble; clearly longing for his toothbrush and his razor because he was a creature of habit when not fomenting revolution; and, as always, completely failed to notice that he was gorgeous. Not for the first time, Logan thought that beauty was really wasted on Scott as he never did a damn thing with it except feed it lots of freshly steamed vegetables and be mildly surprised when people wanted to take it to bed.
In the past, Scott had been the kind of guy that men looked past although women had always noticed him. Dressed in civilian clothes and with the ruby quartz mistaken for sunglasses, perhaps he could look negligible yet, even that physique could be disguised by enough layers, as Emma had bemoaned in the past, when she had made the mistake – as she phrased it – of permitting Scott to dress himself. Scott had still been trying to tidy his bed-tousled hair as the sunlight came licking in through the marble pillars and tried to turn his skin to honeyed gold, to disguise the shadows under his eyes and smooth away his imperfections. Logan had stopped being in Scott’s head in that moment because he had realized how seductive that place could be if Scott stayed there too long, but that it would mould him to fit its mythology even if it had to take away what made him Scott Summers in the process. It had, after all, rejected his mutation. It wouldn’t let him be a man with optic blasts. It wouldn’t let him be a man who had faults. It would let him be beautiful and desirable and beloved by heroes but Logan wasn’t even sure if it would let Scott be a hero himself. He felt a flare of hostility at the prospect of Scott Summers being some other warrior’s spear carrier – not to mention spear warmer – when the guy had led the X-Men against every imaginable opponent for more than a decade, and realized that, no, he didn’t want Scott to rot in prison, with that brilliant brain of his rusting with disuse. The man had no idea how to take a vacation. He lived on his nerves and his instincts and his relentless training, and he didn’t know any other way to be. He might think that mythological world was being kind to him. He might even think that he liked it there. But it would swallow him up like Krakoa, and, unlike Krakoa, it might not spit him out again unharmed. The kaleidoscope turned, a tangled movie reel of more of the same: sex and pain and torture and loss and sorrow and persecution and isolation and loneliness and grief and betrayal and revelation and such small victories…. Logan buried children as Scott that he had buried as himself, and did the same with Kurt, Scott’s guilt and grief coming in subtly different flavors from his own, and broke down mid-elegy, broken-hearted over the death of the son he had been forced to give up in the future, and lost Jean over and over again, and had sex with Emma and Howlett and Jean — God, this, in the end, after all that longing, was how he got to have sex with Jean…. And Logan sucked it up, because that was what he did. That was what they all did. They were X-Men, and whoever’s life they had been forced to witness, it would have looked much like this. The only difference was that someone else’s memories would have come in more colors than crimson. The loss and pain and suffering would have been about the same.

Still, Scott did come across as more martyred than most, and the recurring pain motif from all those torture sessions didn’t help to offset the St. Sebastian haze – nor did fricking Hawkeye’s arrow going into his throat over and over again.

Hawkeye was rocking backwards and forwards with his hands to his head, moaning, “Make it stop…make it stop…”

“Barton, you suck up real torture without a whimper all the time,” Logan pointed out. “This is someone else’s, second-hand. Stop wussing out.”

“I don’t care about the pain! Screw the pain! How can you stand all this crap in your head?” Hawkeye demanded, and Logan realized that the Avengers had nothing like as much experience of telepathy as the X-Men did, which was why this was sawing on Barton’s last nerve.

Emma, who had been forced to endure not only her ex-boyfriend’s torture, but sex with his ex-wife and girlfriends and the man with Logan’s face he had just slept with, as well as Scott spiraling over and over and over again through the murder of Charles Xavier, smelt of building anger and as if she should be giving off blue and white fury sparks. She had never been good at watching Scott suffer and she’d had three and a half hours of it; and Logan had no doubt she was blaming the Avengers for everything that had happened here today, not just Stark losing the blood samples or the rest of them handing Scott over to mutant torturers, but everything, including Scott’s true mental fragility.
being exposed to people she considered his enemies, and Scott having slept with other people. As a betting man, he was ready to lay odds she was building towards an eruption, like some geyser in Iceland that boiled up through the ice and showered everyone in burning rubble. Which made it all the more surprising when she stepped across and began to give Hawkeye quiet instruction in how to separate his own brain from the incoming images.

Unfortunately, the guy flinched when she came near him and Emma rolled her eyes. “What do you imagine I’m going to do to you, Barton? Put an arrow in your throat?”

“You turned the guy you supposedly loved into a drooling vegetable!”

“That was Cassandra Nova.”

“You did all that sick shit to him in the bedroom!”

“A little role-playing between consenting adults?”

Frost sounded genuinely perplexed by that accusation and Logan was with her. Most of the sex between Scott and Emma had been amazingly good to experience – one of the few upsides to this whole clusterfuck of a mission, in fact – and, as for the times when Emma had nudged Scott into letting her try something a little different, hell, Domino wasn’t exactly a vanilla girl either, and as for Viper and Mystique….

Hawkeye had begun to explain heatedly exactly why what Frost had done to Summers – and consequently the rest of them – was Bad and Wrong, when Hank, checking Scott’s stats, said that he thought his fever was dropping; even as he said it, the intensity of the images began to lessen and everyone heaved a collective sigh of relief.

His torturers had ripped Scott’s uniform to pieces fitting the electrodes to his bare skin so he was now barely decent. As it was now bearable to approach him without bleeding from the ears, and it seemed kinder to do this while he was still unconscious, McCoy, removed the catheter, and all but one of the drips, and began to ease him out of his clothing, clean up his wounds, and dress him in something less ragged.

Rogers got up and walked away from where McCoy was seeing to Summers as if he just needed to put some space between himself and them. Logan knew what had shaken Rogers up and it was no surprise that Stark did too. As McCoy went on attending to Scott while Magneto and Frost watched him do it, Rogers, Stark, and Logan walked away to where the bottles and glasses were glistening, not at all incidentally, away from where Magneto and Frost were sitting.

Logan offered, “At least he doesn’t think you might feel better if you just went ahead and raped him.”

Rogers put a hand up to his head. “I’m not really used to being seen as a bullying, kidnapping thug who believes that might is right and mutants are second-class citizens.”

Stark handed Rogers a drink. “Be fair now, he’s trying incredibly hard not to see you like that.”

“That’s the part that makes me want to murder him the most,” Logan admitted. “The way he’s trying so hard to forgive Hank and me. The way he keeps reminding himself of all the good we’ve done, and how we’re not really backstabbing traitors who don’t give a shit about our own species, even though he always wondered, when the chips were down, if we’d choose us or them, and it turned out we chose them, but, you know, it might not be all bad, we might just have done that out of spite because of our personal enmity towards him. We might still care about mutants under the surface.”
“Don’t…” Stark shook his head. “I don’t want to think about how many times he gets visions of vicious, country-invading, thuggish us and immediately starts telling himself that we’re heroes. We’re good men. We so are. Like a kid trying to make himself believe in Santa Claus once the doubts have set in. And that’s before I drop the fucking phoenix on him with my insanely irresponsible meddling in things too big and complicated and cosmic and spiritual for my non-mutant capitalist brain to understand.”

Romanoff engaged the autopilot and spun around to say in a voice, like theirs, too low for Emma and Magneto’s ears. “Is it really such a shock to your delicate sensibilities to discover that someone who was on the other side from you in a recent conflict has a different perception of events and still thinks that you were wrong?”

“Summers thinks we invaded a friendly country, wrecked any chance mutants had of ever knowing autonomy, sent Charles Xavier out to be murdered, and destroyed his life forever because when the chips were down we had no respect for him or his species.”

“Yes, Steve, but he doesn’t think we did it on purpose. It was just an accidental bi-product of us being arrogant, privileged, uninformed douchebags. So, there’s that to hang onto.”

Logan understood why Stark was wrapping things up in sarcasm and copious amounts of alcohol-substitute ginger ale.

Rogers said, “He’s looking at me and seeing a hero who acted like a villain – the same thing I see when I look at him.”

Logan flipped the top off another beer bottle. “And, again – still didn’t work with you for years and only realize that it might actually give you some self-hatred issues if you brutally ass-rape him after meeting a different version of you – because that’s never not gonna give me warm fuzzies.”

Stark said, “Logan, it was a fleeting thought and he feels bad about it. He never wanted you to know he had it. Maybe the point is that he thought it would be worth it to put himself through that if it made you feel better.”

“It’s the fact he thought it would make me feel better that I am never going to forgive him for.”

“You still matter more to him than he matters to you. Can’t you claim that as a victory?”

Logan said thickly, “You have no idea how much he matters to me.”

Romanoff said patiently, “Cyclops doesn’t see the world the way you do, and he doesn’t see you the way you see yourselves. That’s a thing that happens sometimes. Most people come to grips with it before they hit puberty. Try to live with it.”

“But there is no common ground here,” Rogers said. “All three of them – Summers, Frost, and Lehnsherr – think the world got saved despite our best efforts to destroy it, mutants, and them, through our overweening arrogance. And Summers keeps trying so hard to forgive us for it.”

“Annoying, isn’t it?” Stark said. “It’s the trying to forgive us part that is really sticking in my craw, too. I mean, we’ve destroyed Utopia and ruined his life forever, and we’re the worst thing that ever happened to him in a life that includes dead wives galore, a constant stream of children he has to give up for their own good, Nathaniel Essex, Apocalypse, William Stryker, and a creepy clone son that force-fed him baby food, but, hey, our intentions were good, and we’re heroes who risk our lives for others every day….”

“You sound like bitter washerwomen,” Romanoff said with interest, as if she had just successfully
identified what they reminded her of. “Interesting. I suppose the superhero community is rather like a very small village.” She turned back to her piloting.

Stark hung back as Rogers made his way back to his seat, like they were actors in a play who had to be in place when the curtain went up for their audience of three, one of whom was now stirring just beneath the surface of consciousness. Stark said, “Logan, he said he didn’t know who you were any more. He admitted that was true. That thought he had – and unthought afterwards – that was about him, not about you.”

Logan thought about Scott flat on his back and limply acquiescent to whatever happened next, however much it hurt, lying on the cold floor of that prison with his legs open, and the rage-flame licking through Logan like a forest fire. Had he had an erection at the thought of driving his claws into Scott Summers’ body? He honestly didn’t remember. He didn’t think he had, but he just couldn’t be sure. “But he always did. He always knew me better than I knew myself.”

“If you were trying to kill him, he’d be dead,” Stark returned. “Much as it pains me to have to say something nice about you, when it comes to bloodthirsty berserker slaughter, you’re The Man. You got close enough to do that to him, you got close enough to rip out his spine.”

“Fine. I was trying to half-kill him.”

“In which you succeeded admirably,” Emma said crisply. She had got through the ordeal with more panache than the rest of them, but she was still close to explosion point. Logan wondered if she was going to admit, even to herself, how much of that was down to Scott spreading his legs for Howlett. “You put him in the infirmary for a week. Well played, Logan. I’m surprised you didn’t gloat about that, too, Henry, when you were making your nasty little phone call. Not only did Scott nearly have to see all the children on Utopia murdered by a giant rogue Sentinel right before his eyes, he got shredded by your half-trained weasel as well.”

As she walked away to refill her glass, McCoy raised his voice to say, “That wasn’t what I was calling about! Emma…? You know I would never rejoice over mutants being terrorized by Sentinels.”

“Really? I thought that was exactly what you were doing. In fact, I got the strongest impression both then and since that you and Logan would gloat over absolutely any misfortune hitting the mutant race including its guaranteed extinction just as long as neither one of you has to ever admit to Scott
that he was right and you were wrong.”

“We weren’t wrong. He wasn’t right.”

“No one was right,” Logan said impatiently. “No one won. Everyone fucking lost, Frost. The only person here who thinks what happened recently was a victory is Cyke.”

“Well, we’re not extinct and we’re moving further back from the brink every day. I don’t know what kind of mutant you have to be to not call that a victory.” Emma downed a gin and tonic like it had personally offended her. “No thanks to any of you, but then no one in this stupid little glider who isn’t Erik, Scott or I cares about the extinction of our species, do they?”

“Emma, that isn’t fair.”

Logan could feel his temper bubbling up but was determined to keep a lid on it. He was not going to be that snarling claw-slashing guy from Cyke’s memories when Howlett was in there, too, being all patience and good humor, the bastard. So he kept his tone perfectly steady: “What makes you think I don’t care about the extinction of a species of which I’m a frickin’ member?”

“You sided with the Avengers. They were on the side of: possible risk to the humans outweighs possible benefit to the mutants and you sided with them. They’ve never given a Gucci knock-off for us, as long as we don’t rock the boat or break too many rules. They wanted us to register. You remember that? So Stark’s Sentinels could find us that much faster when we were being interned for our ‘own protection’. For God’s sake, Logan – Captain Hypocrite over there had the unmitigated gall to call his misfit salmagundi of thugs, mutant killers, and government toadies a ‘unity team’. I knew all I needed to know about how much he cared about mutant rights when he put the crazy bitch who brought us to the brink of extinction on the bloody team! So, yes, a man or even a barely-housetrained hairball with claws like yourself is known by the company he keeps. Meaning that in my eyes, you will never not be a sniveling traitor unworthy of your x-gene.”

Logan was aware of the shocked silence from the Avengers at the sheer intensity of her anger toward them. He admired the composure with which Erik was just sitting there as this fury lashed out around them all like one of Ororo’s most spectacular weather fronts. Magneto hadn’t even flinched when Frost insulted his damaged daughter, although he suspected, Erik still felt the lash of it, his children’s disappointment in him, the way they felt his disappointment with them. He suspected neither father nor children had ever entirely lost the knack of either loving or needing each other, but they kept their distance all the same. Scott was now the only child that Erik hadn’t given up on, and Logan thought even that tenuous link might be severed before too long. If Erik still hungered for a more radical solution to the Purifiers, Scott was probably less the guy to deliver it now than he had been a year ago. Ironically, so was Logan. He didn’t think either of them had another X-Force in him.

And, yeah, Emma’s words had hurt. They’d wounded him and they’d angered him, but he reckoned her anger had been coming for a long time, even before she’d had to sit there with all eyes on her while her ex-boyfriend got cycled through the highlights of his personal hells. Not so long ago, she and Cyke had been royalty of Utopia, and now they were fugitives and she needed someone to blame. Didn’t mean the words didn’t sting but him yelling back wasn’t going to solve anything, and for once he didn’t feel angry, anyway, just weary of it all, wearied by the horror of being in Cyke’s head and living through all his despair and defeat and his anguish over Xavier, and all this misery, the grief and loss and rage that the rest of them were having to drag around with them like some evil Santa’s sack of poisoned toys. They probably should have found a better way than this and clearly Emma felt they were entirely to blame, just as Logan felt Scott had been the problem from first to last, but the fact remained that they had all been dragged through it, and Xavier had died.
because of it, and Scott was fractured and broken as a consequence, and if Logan was honest, the rest of them weren’t in much better shape. They just hadn’t had to broadcast how damaged they were to all the people they would least want to know. Even if they had been the best of friends before they began this little outing, the over-protective Emma Frost he remembered would still have hated them for being given access to all of Scott’s worst secrets.

With the kind of patience for which Logan thought he deserved a fricking medal, he said, “Is this really about all that or is it about me leaving Cyke in prison when you think he was in danger…?”

“He was in bloody danger! He could have died in there, you horrible little backstabber!” Her elegant flex of her gin glass at Scott’s scar tissue underlined the pithy accuracy of her insult. Logan could appreciate that even in the midst of being angry.

And, yes, they’d all got to experience first hand, now, the torture collar and the prison guard brutality and the attempted murders by friends and foes alike and the absolute desolation of Jake’s death. The Avengers now knew how it felt to feel connected to every mutant on the planet by a desperate thread and how shattering a blow it was when one of those fragile fellow species members got blotted out, and they also knew, for future reference, how it felt to come that close to being killed by Logan. It wasn’t as if Scott’s were the only secrets that had been spilled here.

Logan continued grittily, “Or is at least some of this about him sleeping with Howlett?”

There was enough of a pause that he knew the thrust had gone home. She took another sip of ice-melted gin. “Scott and I are over. Who he sleeps with is none of my business.”

“It’s none of my business either. Doesn’t mean I liked him sleeping with Howlett. I don’t.” Because maybe it was past time that one of them admitted it.

Hawkeye muttered resentfully, “At least Howlett uses lube.”

Emma cast an irritated glance at him. “Are you still whining about that? It was an experiment. Don’t be so feeble.”

“Well, it hurt!”

“I can’t believe how pathetically unadventurous all your sex-lives obviously are,” she said loftily, emptying her glass.

“I can’t believe Summers let you do those things to him.”

“Well, unlike you, he’s not a whiny crybaby, in bed or out of it.”

“…ask me he’s a muff-diving masochist with mommy issues who needs fucking therapy…” Hawkeye muttered, but quietly enough that Emma could pretend not to hear him.

Stark still looked as if someone had slapped him across the face and Logan remembered again that he and Frost had dated, that this was personal for him perhaps even more than it was for Logan and McCoy. Stark took a swig from his own glass, eyes on hers. “You never really liked me much at all, did you, Emma?”

“Does anyone, Stark? I mean do you actually have any likeable attributes apart from being rich?” Even by her standards that was unnecessarily cruel, but she shrugged as if it was of no account. “I can interact with people like you when I have to – spoiled, privileged know-nothings in their ivory Avengers towers. It was what we had to do not to die out. There are a lot of things you can do when you need to keep your species alive.”
“Well, don’t subject yourself to that ordeal again on my account,” Stark said brittily.

Her glance was dismissive. “Don’t worry, I won’t be.”

Rogers said quietly, “She doesn’t mean it, Tony.”

Stark threw back the contents of his glass in one gulp. “No, I really think she does.” He steeled himself to look back at Emma. “This is about the blood samples? Do you think I just left them out where anyone could take them because, hey, Summers is only a mutant and who gives a damn about those freaky losers? We have been to the wall for you people, over and over again! Steve jumped into the Negative Zone to get your chronically concussed boyfriend back for you…!”

“I know Scott let you have his blood in good faith and I know what it got used for, Stark.”

“Those samples were taken by thieves who got through my security… I didn’t put them out on the sidewalk labelled ‘mutant blood, please steal’! I didn’t think it was any possible danger to Summers because I was sure you were the people who’d stolen them.”

“Without you, none of this happens!”

She did scream that and even Logan flinched, because this wasn’t just the blood samples, this was Stark breaking the Phoenix Force, and Xavier being dead, dead, dead, a soul-shredding infinity of times in the spiraling self-hating vortex that was Scott Summers’ tortured mind. And he realized – because Emma was so furious that even her usually perfectly-controlled telepathy spilled out, broadcasting her thoughts with it – that she thought they were murderers, who had killed Charles Xavier and got away with it, just like Wanda had got away with her crimes. That they always had and always would get away with everything because they were the fucking Avengers, and those bastards got to be the privileged few that wrote the rules to suit themselves, while the rest of them had to wear the orange jumpsuits and suffer the remorse along with the rest of the peasantry.

McCoy said quietly, “Emma, that isn’t true and this isn’t you. This isn’t how you really feel. You’re upset about Scott. We’re all upset about Scott. That was quite the ordeal, for him and for us, but we’re not your enemies – or his – and we don’t want to hurt any of you, and if you took a moment to think about it you would remember that we didn’t do any of those things to him. In fact sometimes we were the people who saved him from them being done to him. Like Tony said, when Scott was trapped in the Negative Zone it was the Avengers whose help you asked for and it was an Avenger who saved Scott’s life at no inconsiderable risk to himself. Not everything has changed since then –”

Emma made a short, angry, and unrepeatable rebuttal involving impossible contortions and the larger farm animals. Rogers tried manfully not to rock back on his heels, but Logan seriously doubted that he had heard those words in that order before. Logan made a private resolution to curse less in front of the kids, even Quire. Then they sat around in the possibly the world’s most awkward silence as they waited for Scott’s temperature to come down and to see if the man who woke up after having his worst experiences recycled endlessly through his fevered brain was still even vaguely sane.

At Natasha’s suggestion, Emma had gone up front to sit with her in the co-pilot’s seat. Logan had been told enough times over the centuries that women were not the inarticulate grunting Neanderthals that men were so had cocked an ear to see how the fairer sex handled the aftermath of a complete emotional meltdown.

After a moment, Natasha, her gaze fixed on the controls, said, “You okay, Frost?”
Reapplying her make-up with a perfectly steady hand, Emma said crisply, “No.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Emma darted her a sideways look which Natasha returned. Emma said, “What do you think?”

Natasha nodded. “Vodka and tonic later when the boys have finished the dick measuring? No conversation guaranteed.”

“Hold the tonic, make mine a triple, and throw in a visit to that new gay strip club, and it’s a date, Romanoff….”


“I think in this case it lies in the aplomb with which the empty, drunken soul-searching is performed, Logan. Scott did, after all, end up slumped insensibly on a table in the Hellfire Club. Whereas I doubt Emma or Natasha will need to be carried home – unlike, I imagine, anyone who is unwise enough to get in their way.”

He and Scott had not had a tawdry one-night stand after Logan had tossed Scott over his shoulder and carried him off to help him break into the Weapon Plus program. Mostly because they’d been too busy breaking into the Weapon Plus program – although Scott’s brain-bleeding hangover and general uptightness had probably also been a factor. Logan could easily see Frost and Romanoff getting it on tonight and then moving on without a wrinkle in their relationship whereas if he and Scott had fallen into bed instead of falling into another adventure…well, he didn’t know what the consequences would have been, but there would have been consequences. It wouldn’t have been just that he had hit that, go him, and a smug smile to himself on the next mission. There would have been emotional fallout because there would have been an emotional connection forged. Scott didn’t do meaningless sex. He was half in love with Howlett and Hercules right now, just because they’d been kind to him and then physically intimate with him. Scott didn’t know how to respond to that combo in a way that wasn’t emotional.

It really would be that simple, despite the perfect surface and the unbreachable cool, because, underneath, Scott was a damaged guy who had never been shown enough kindness to make up for all the cruelty and emotional neglect that had gone into his years as an abused kid, and Logan had never got that until today. He could have just grabbed him any time and shoved him into a dark corner and kissed him like he meant it and Scott would probably have been putty in his hands. Given that Logan hadn’t really thought he wanted him, he didn’t know why he was as angry and upset about that realization as he was.

McCoy was regarding him over his spectacles. “I know you have some canine qualities, Logan, but that doesn’t make it necessary for you to play dog in the manger.”

“What, Howlett had Slim so now I need to have him, too, just to even the score? You think my buttons are that easy to push?”

“Well, aren’t they?”

A rebuttal would be easy but with half of Scott’s worst memories now taking up space in all their heads, it felt a little cheap. Logan sighed. “I’ll get back to you on that.”

He tried not to think about Howlett’s oiled up finger slipping so sweetly up inside Scott, as Scott lay
starfish splayed and sweat-shining on that acreage of bed, so pleasurably limp, then began that protesting murmur because it was enough, that skillful fingering to get his cock twitching again. Tried not to think about the way Scott’s whole body had responded, his mind and body blood-pulsing to that fingering rhythm, filling up with Howlett so damn eagerly, legs opening so the man could push in deeper, spine arching to meet him, all soft, willing gasps. The way those steel-muscled legs had wrapped around Howlett’s hairy ass and just pulled the guy in….

Only knowing that McCoy was watching him – and probably smelling the want on him too – stopped Logan from putting his finger in his mouth and wetting it just so he could imagine what would happen next.

One of Scott’s better memories was having surgery without an anesthetic in a gutted mansion; or at least waking up on a bed of leaves to find that it had been done. It probably hurt Frost because it came from back when he was married to Jean, but it sent out tendrils of warmth and love. They had come home to a house with nothing in it, not even running water, and a Scott who was literally a ticking timebomb, and they had worked together, put aside previous enmities, improvised and problem-solved like heroes to get the bomb out of him and keep him alive. Scott had been so proud of them and so touched and grateful that they had done that for him. Logan found himself thinking that only Scott could have the memory of coming round from major surgery stored in his happy place but even Stark hadn’t made a crack about it. That Scott wasn’t this one, somehow; even to get through a humiliating trainwreck no one wanted to make fun of the guy who had been so in love with his wife and still lost her twice, before he was twenty-five.

It hurt to remember it, from Logan’s perspective, because he really had loved that guy; he’d been willing him to come through it, watching the blood well up from under his claws as he had to cut into him, shrinking from those screams when Jean’s telepathy had slipped just for a second with the terrible strain of keeping Scott under and keeping the bomb from exploding and Scott had woken up, un-anaesthetized, in the middle of major surgery. There was probably nothing Logan wouldn’t have done to save that version of Scott, and not just for Jeannie’s sake, although he’d been thinking of her, too, but for that Scott himself. And he could barely even see him now in the man with his face lying unconscious in front of him. It felt like the worst betrayal on Scott’s part to still look the same when he was the one who had lost that Scott, whom Logan had loved like a brother, somewhere where neither he nor Logan could find him again.

A few thoughts like that and Logan would almost understand why McCoy had brought those kids here from the past. Almost.

It was the memory they probably should have stayed with, for Scott’s sake, but the pain in that moment when he woke up while being operated on was lacerating enough to justify moving away from that time without having to admit that it was too upsetting to remember the Scott Summers who had been so in love with Jean Grey and still thought the high way was the only road to travel. Somehow that kid had turned into this guy and they’d all let it happen. As the bus kept exploding and the kids kept dying, and they walked into a world of burning flesh where the Purifiers had fired a whole town just to kill one baby, he could see the Avengers flinching from that unreasoning hatred like a wall of toxic fumes. Logan had actually forgotten that they didn’t really know what that was like. No doubt Emma thought it was character-building for them; he thought that after all the other shit these guys had been through it was something they could have been spared.

He hadn’t known himself how much Scott kept thinking about baby Nathan as he saw the charred remains of other men’s sons. Or how much he’d been thinking about him when Cable was in the future with the baby; how much Scott had been wanting the baby to come back, downright yearning for it every damned night as he put together that stupid crib; how he’d even let himself imagine what it would be like for them all to have her there, the x-family with their x-baby, and Scott getting to be
a father again, this time without the world ripping the child out of his arms…except, of course, he’d never even got to hold Baby Hope once he’d handed her over. One minute she’d been a gurgling baby and the next she was a surly teenager who didn’t even like him. One day, Logan really needed to point out to Scott that that was most men’s experience of parenthood, even when their kids weren’t raised in apocalyptic futures by their techno-organic-virus-riddled-twenty-years-older-than-them sons….

Scott didn’t groan because he’d come round in too many hostile environments where it could be your life on the line to keep silent, however much it hurt, but Logan heard his heart-rate change and somehow his legs had walked him over there in double quick time.

“Scott…?” He rested a hand on his forehead and it was definitely less clammy. “Do you know where you are?”

Scott squinted around at his ruby-quartz filtered surroundings and put a hand to his head. He looked sick and white but surprisingly calm. “I seem to be in an Avengers Quinjet. Going by the mini-bar I presume one fitted out by Iron Man. What happened to the super-sekrit prison? And who died in my head?”

_Half the people you’ve ever loved, over and over and over again_, was the only accurate response to that, so Logan wasn’t surprised when McCoy started talking medical stats quickly.

“It sounds like I’m fine,” Scott interrupted, as he sat up in one smooth movement because this was a guy who did a hundred crunches a day just for the fun of it. Logan could see his damned perfect abs flexing now as he did it. Hawkeye had a point about the couch potato torture. The bruises over the damned perfect abs were a little less pleasant to look at, though.

McCoy said irritably, “You’re not ‘fine’, Scott. ‘No obvious additional brain damage’ doesn’t equal ‘fine’. I need to get your fluid intake up….” There was the kind of bustling and fussing that was at once annoying and vaguely soothing because it was familiar. Scott suggested caffeine and plenty of it as a possible fluid he could intake and McCoy told him not to even think about pulling that drip out of his arm and gave him a glass of water.

“Some things never change, I see,” Scott murmured, but he did obediently drink the water all the same. Conversationally, he said, “I presume there’s a reason why you’re all looking at me like that. Am I going to want to know what it is?”

“Almost certainly not,” McCoy said.

“Let’s just say your new codename is ‘Whoreclops’,” Hawkeye told him.

Still holding his clearly thumping head, Scott said wearily, “Erik…?”

Magneto told him, less graphically than Logan would have done, and less kindly than Rogers would have phrased it, but it was an objectively accurate account.

“So…basically you’ve all been in my head for the last three hours?”

“No, Summers,” Stark said, “you’ve been in our heads, taking up all available space with your hideous daily traumas. For which – and I think I need to make this clear from the outset – I will absolutely never forgive you.”

“Fuck his daily traumas,” Hawkeye said. “You want to know the weirdest thing about your sex-life, Summers? It’s that you don’t even know how weird it is. Normal women don’t do things like that to harmless vegetables!”
Emma rolled her eyes. “Oh not that again. I don’t know which is the most feeble of the two of you: Squawkguy or Cryin’ Man. If you can be traumatized by the sex-life of someone who was, for most of his life, a total Boy Scout, you clearly need to get out more.”

“Boy Scout, my aching ass,” Hawkeye muttered darkly.

“Will someone find Barton’s mute button?” Logan demanded. “We all experienced the same thing, Hawkeye, and Frost has a point – stop yer whinin’.” He steeled himself to look at Scott. “You okay?”

Scott still had a hand pressed to his head but he managed a nod, then winced as the movement obviously caused agonizing spasms. “I’ve woken up in worse places.” He barely flinched as McCoy applied an icepack to his cracked ribs. “Worse company too. Sorry about the psychic feedback loop.”

“Not your fault,” Logan said. “Unlike you getting taken to torture central in the first place. Why didn’t you tell me it was a one-way trip, Scott?”

“I wasn’t sure.”

“You were pretty damn sure. Look, Cap didn’t know that the intel they gave him wasn’t on the up and up.”

“I knew that,” Scott sounded mildly aggrieved that it even needed saying out loud. “Unlike you and me, Rogers believes government officials when they tell him things.”

“Hill didn’t know it wasn’t true either. The info came to her through official sources. S.H.I.E.L.D. are going nuts trying to work out where they’ve been infiltrated.”

“They should put Brand on it.” Scott flexed his neck carefully. “If they really wanted to know what happened, they would.”

“Brand’s extra-terrestrials not internal affairs.”

Scott shrugged. “Probably why we haven’t been invaded in the past few weeks but S.H.I.E.L.D. leaks like a sieve.”

“I’ll tell Abigail you said that,” McCoy said, bandaging Scott’s ribs. “She’ll appreciate the confidence. But it still doesn’t explain why you didn’t give Logan a heads up when you strongly suspected that you were being sold down the river, unless you just really wanted to get to the sea…?”

Watching, McCoy work on Scott’s various cuts and bruises, Logan was struck again by how Scott had no emotional connection to his own injuries. He never had been someone who went and inspected them in the mirror; he didn’t care if they scarred – although Jean and Emma certainly had – great works of art in the Smithsonian had been less anxiously scrutinized for damage after a burglary than Scott’s face after a run in with bad guys – and he didn’t want any sympathy for them; he just wanted them to heal as fast and as thoroughly as possible so he could get back to full fitness. It was why he had always been such a dream patient. While everyone else was bitching or whimpering, or pushing people away who tried to help them, Scott just resignedly did whatever his current physician told him to do. Which was why he was automatically lifting his arms so McCoy could bandage his ribs and turning his head into the light when McCoy shone it on his various contusions. Even though he and Beast were barely on speaking terms these days, old habits died too hard for Scott not to be obeying orders when they came from someone whose medical degree he respected.
And he wasn’t the only one who’d reverted to old habits. Logan noticed that McCoy had automatically reached for that insanely expensive ointment he had developed specifically because of Jean’s horror of Scott’s beauty being marred, and was smoothing it carefully over every cut. Logan wasn’t even sure Scott knew what that stuff was for; as he recalled McCoy had always told him it was to ward off infection.

McCoy frowned over the bruise Logan had left on Scott’s left cheekbone as punishment for sleeping with Howlett. “That’s a nasty one. He must have come close to cracking the bone. Which one of those ignorant thugs did that to you?”

Scott’s expression didn’t betray Logan with a flicker even as Henry smoothed an extra thickness of healing cream over his throbbing cheekbone. “Wasn’t taking names. How long until the ribs heal, Henry?”

“Left to heal naturally you’re not going to be fit for missions for a month. I can try and mix up some nanocytes typed to your DNA, like I did with your thrice-broken jaw that time when Santos hit you, but, as I’m sure you remember, the process isn’t painless and I think your blood pressure has really had enough spikes today. If I can get you stabilized enough that I can sedate you for the procedure and run some morphine in while it’s working, I’ll consider it….”

“You’re the doctor, but I don’t remember it hurting for longer than an hour and it saved about twenty thousand dollars worth of dental work.”

“A fine economy – except that it took about half a billion of Warren’s money to get that nanocyte technology developed – and everyone else who’s used that particular cure has called me very unflattering names while the process is going on.” There was a pause before McCoy said, “You have many faults, Scott, but you were certainly never a whiner.”

“Be honest, Henry,” Emma put in. “It was the thought of how loudly I would scream – not to mention what I’d do to Rockslide the next time I saw him if you didn’t put Scott’s face back the way it was that gave you the mental clarity to make that experimental nanocyte technology finally work.”

“Well, the – shall we say – virago incentive may have added a certain extra spur to ensure my work was flawless, it’s true…..”

Logan had a lot of things he wanted to say as McCoy tended to all those injuries Scott didn’t even need to have if he’d just told Logan that he thought he was being set-up – like how Scott didn’t even have the right to just give up, which everyone on this plane knew that he had done – which, incidentally, Logan was blaming entirely on Howlett and his touchy-feely wrong-way-to-manage-Cyke crap. He just wasn’t sure how to start or how to phrase it that might not make things worse. The guy had basically told him he was just going for a dip then walked off into the sea in front of him, fully intending to keep walking, leaving Logan holding his clothes. Later, he was going to schedule some more time to be angry about it, but for now he thought he probably ought to pick his words with care.

Grimly he said, “You know, Cyke, you really are the only guy I’ve ever met where the whole ‘the beatings will continue until morale improves’ approach would actually work.”

“You think you’re not that guy?”

Well, perhaps they both did better when they had something to push against. “What happened?” Logan persisted. “You think the world ran out of wrongs to right?”

“I was tired.”
“You haven’t got the right to just check out. There are college dropouts with bad goatees still wanting to wear your face on a t-shirt. Look – the kids say things are better.”

Scott glanced up at him in surprise. “You mean…Jean and…me and the others…?”

“Yeah, those kids. They say it’s better in this time than theirs for mutants, on the street. They talked to kids their age and those kids were okay with them being different, some of them even thought it was cool. They said that never happened in your time – their time, whatever. It’s just all of us they think are useless fuckups who they can’t possibly leave in charge of the world, but the humans…much improved, in their opinion.”

“You shouldn’t be letting them just wander around unsupervised, Logan.”

“I’m not! You keep snucking out! And stop stealing my stuff. And I don’t kill people for money.”

“I…never said you…did. Please don’t yell.” Scott was still obediently not wincing as McCoy kept applying ointment to the cuts and bruises on his face as carefully as an oil painter with a palette knife; McCoy unable to stop himself reverting to the man who would inevitably have Scott’s anxious wife or girlfriend leaning over him demanding to know if it would scar, while he took every possible care that it would not. He turned Scott’s head so that he could shine a stronger light on every cut to check for depth and whether or not it needed invisible micro-stitching.

Logan could hear Hawkeye bitching to Stark in the background that no one ever took that much trouble over him when he got punched in the face. “…Oh no, it’s all ‘You’re meant to be ruggedly handsome, Hawkeye’ or ‘Trust me, a broken nose adds character – now just spit your teeth into this bowl’…”

“Seriously, there was less fuss made over the Venus de Milo’s missing arms than McCoy’s making over Cyclops’ cheekbones.”

Frost said impatiently, “Beauty is rare and worth preserving. Scott’s beautiful – you two aren’t. Get over it.”

As Stark pointed out in rebuttal that everyone who was anyone agreed that Anthony Edwin Stark was a very handsome man indeed and he had the magazine articles to prove it, Logan attempted to block out their twittering and persisted to Scott: “Not – you, you. Kid You.”

“The time-displaced version of me thinks you kill people for money? Why?”

Logan scratched his jaw. “Young Slim and me got off to kind of a rocky start. Kid’s still a little jumpy. Also, he likes rules and uniforms and lesson bells, so I think he thinks my school’s a zoo. I can’t believe you were ever that young.” And if he sounded affronted it was because he kinda…was. Slim had always been too young and idealistic, anyway; to go ahead and be even younger and more insanely trusting was just beyond the pale. “I mean you were a wet behind the ears, rule-obsessed, teacher’s pet when I first met you and I really thought that was as bad as it got. It’s hard to believe there was a version of you going on missions who was even more strait-laced and clueless than that guy.”

“He’ll get less uptight when he gets older. If he lives to get older, which he won’t, if you keep letting him run around unsupervised….”

“Don’t even think about lecturing me on the right way to keep mutant children safe, Cyke.”

“God, not this again,” Scott murmured wearily, a hand still clutched to his head. He said, “So, they’re not impressed with us, then – the original X-Men?”
Logan grimaced. “No. They think we fucked up the world. They feel that no one is doing the job they were doing in their time and that if they go home before they fix our screwups, mutantkind is… well…doomed. Oh, and you, me, and Hank all top their Most Disappointing Future Mutants list. When it comes to good guys, apparently we rank somewhere below Mystique.”

“Well, that’s comforting.” Scott needed a moment to wrap his aching head around that and Logan didn’t blame him. It had made Logan angry and then seriously depressed, to realize that the kids thought the world they had fought and bled so hard for was in terrible shape, but Scott took it more philosophically. “Maybe they’re right. Maybe they couldn’t do a worse job than we did. At least they can get along without fighting – that’s more than you and I can.”

Logan appreciated Scott shouldering half the blame for their current estrangement, because he knew the kids saw it as mostly coming from him. The graffiti in the boy’s bathroom had been quite explicit on the subject. He said, “Everything looks easy when you’re sixteen. But you and I both know they have to go back before one of them gets their dumb selves killed and the future gets changed.”

Scott shrugged, trying not to wince as Henry finished applied some industrial strength healing chapstick to his cut mouth. “Would it matter, really? The world will reset itself like it’s done before. It’ll be different and you or I may not be in it any more, but will it necessarily be worse? Perhaps it’ll be better.”

“Scott – if Young Slim goes, he takes you with him. You don’t just cease to be, you never got to be. Are you seriously telling me that doesn’t bother you?”

Scott’s face was registering surprise. “Are you seriously telling me that it does bother you?”

“Of course it bothers me!” As Scott clutched at his head and made an inarticulate protest, Logan made the effort to lower his voice: “Yes, you clueless jerk, of course it bothers me.”

“Charles would still be alive.”

Logan really hated the little hitch in Scott’s usually steady tone when he said that, a childish hope, like waiting for the Easter Bunny to come. He and McCoy exchanged a look over Scott’s shoulder, both grimacing, but then McCoy went back to sticking the bandages down, making it clear that he wasn’t going to join in this conversation, that he was leaving this entirely up to Logan.

Scott, the man’s dead and buried and he really isn’t coming back this time. And he can’t ever forgive you – however much you need him to – because he’s too dead for housecalls, because you fucking killed him. Something you have to live with forever, so you may as well accept that now.

Picking his words with care, Logan said, “I don’t think Charles would be alive. I’m not sure any of us would. I don’t remember everything you ever did in your life, but I seem to remember quite a lot of saving the world along the way.”

“Someone else might have stepped up.”

“Scott, the main idea buzzing round in your head for every damned endless year I’ve known you has been that no one will step up if you don’t, and you’re right – on that if not a damn thing else. You don’t do it, no one else does.”

Scott said, “I wonder if Nathan would still exist but with a different father?”

“He’d not be here,” said Logan brutally. “At least half of what’s kept Cable alive all these years is what he inherited from you. His brain does that weird tactical thing yours does and you need a brain like that when you’re living in a bombed out futureworld full of cockroach people. Without you
marring Madelyne, he’d be someone else and he’d probably be dead. If you’d died at sixteen and all you’d ever got to be was an abused kid with eye beams who went to the future and died in it, we’d all of us be someone else and a lot of us would probably be dead. That Scott needs to go home and this Scott needs to get his head out of his ass.”

Scott said mildly, “I’m never going to agree with you about Hope or the Phoenix or the right way to keep ourselves alive, Logan. And I don’t think you’re ever going to be the ‘agree to disagree’ type, are you?”

“You don’t think I’m Mr. Compromise?”

“I’m not sure either of us is.”

Echo of We Who Are About To Die Salute You Scott saying: “Why can’t where we’ve got to…be… here? Why can’t it be okay to be here?”

Logan grimaced. “I don’t like ‘here’ very much.”

Scott gazed intently into his water glass and then downed the contents as if he wished for once it had alcohol in it. “I don’t either. But I don’t see how we can get anywhere else without one of us just giving up.”

Fiercely, Logan said, “I’d rather you fuckin’ fought me forever than just gave up.”

He really wished he could see his eyes because he knew Scott was looking at him and he thought there might be that same tenderness in his gaze – surprised and touched that he was still capable of eliciting any strong emotion in another human being that wasn’t just hate – that he’d seen reflected back in Howlett’s eyes when Scott was looking at him. Scott said quietly, “Armed truce it is then.”

He really hated it when Scott got under his skin like this. Logan ripped the top off another beer bottle and gave it all his attention. “Those shitty kids are probably gonna try to make us hold hands and sing ‘kumbaya’ at some point.”

“We’d better fix the world before they get to that point just in self-defense, then they might go home and leave us alone. Your school looks good by the way. Jean told me to tell you that she loved the name.”

“I know. But I don’t think that was her, Cyke. I think that was how you got yourself to let go of the Phoenix. I think that was probably all you.”

“It felt like her. I like to think it was Jean – and, anyway, I’m sure she would love the name. I hate it, obviously.”

“I hate your school’s name, too.”

“I know.”

And there was that passive aggressive little smirk that always made Logan want to punch him in the face. He said, “I still want to punch you in the face more than I don’t.”

Scott still looked green from the pain of his thumping head but he managed a wan smile. “Do you have any idea how many times a day I’d like to unleash an optic blast in your direction?”

“Yeah. Not anything like often enough, you martyrred bastard.”
Hawkeye could be heard asking Stark what the whole deal was between those two, because he’d never got what their big break up was about in the first place.

Stark poured them both a drink and said, “Well, as far as I can make out, it was to do with child rearing. Logan from’s the stab-stab school of parenting and Summers is from the blast-blast school of parenting and one of them wanted to stab when the other one wanted to blast so they had a knock-down drag out domestic followed by a custody battle over the kids, cited irreconcilable differences, divided up their assets, and then sulked their way through the subsequent divorce. Summers is the equivalent of that ex Logan still can’t talk about without getting bitter and angry and wanting to claw people through the thorax….”

Logan said shortly, “Fuck off, Stark.”

Stark raised his glass to him. “Just calling it as I see it, Wolverine.”

With a hand still clamped to his head, Scott said, “Don’t let him wind you up, Logan. Everyone on this plane knows Stark’s only bugging you because he has a low boredom threshold.”

Stark raised his glass to Scott, too. “Summers, by contrast, is the annoyingly clueless ex who really wanted them to remain on good terms for the sake of the children, and who’s hurt and disappointed by the mutual friends who chose to pick sides. He doesn’t understand why Logan isn’t willing to discuss custody agreements over brunch or why they can’t stay friends. Left to Summers, he and Frost would be having excruciatingly uncomfortable dinners with Logan and Storm in nice restaurants every first Monday of the month.”

“Well, what would be wrong with that?” Scott muttered – cluelessly.

Stark continued blithely, “That’s because Summers is too repressed to get in touch with any of the healthier emotions like jealousy, resentment, bitterness, and rage, so he has no idea what it does to Wolverine there every time he takes his spandex-wrapped ass over to Logan’s clown school for an impromptu visit like nothing’s changed between them, when everything’s changed forever and it can’t ever be what it was….”

“Stark, either stop talking or I throw you out of the plane. Your choice.” Logan pulled himself back from the brink and turned back to Scott. He didn’t trust him not to hit bottom again, especially after his time in that other world with Howlett and his nicey-nicey crap. Scott still looked greenishly pale and like he was barely in the here and now, anyway, and it was probably just the industrial strength migraine but Logan wasn’t taking any chances. “Look – it’s been worse than this, that’s all I’m saying. It’s been worse and it’s getting better but it’s not there yet. It’s a long way away from there yet. You think you’re the only guy doing anything for mutants, don’t you? So, what happens if that stops? What makes you think you’ve got the right to give up?”

He suspected Scott had his eyes closed behind the visor as he said, “I’m tired, Logan. I’m just… really tired.”

“Well, try some cocoa and a good night’s sleep instead of all that sweaty sex with guys you barely know. Especially guys you barely know who look like me.” You whore.

Scott cocked his head at him curiously. “You’re angry about Howlett…? Why…?”

McCoy burst out in exasperation, “Scott, the fact that you’ve known Logan for as long as you have, and yet still need to ask that question…! When there are amoeba on Venus barely groping their way towards binary fission who knew that you sleeping with another Wolverine was something Logan would not take well.”
Scott looked as clueless as Logan would have expected and it was just as annoying as he would have expected as well. “No, I don’t get it. Why would I get it?”

“Why indeed?” Henry finished putting padding over his bruised cheekbone and rechecked the strapping on his ribs. “Normal human interaction always has been an unfathomable mystery to you, so I don’t know why that should change now. Put this on.”

McCoy held out a clean, unripped shirt for him and as he struggled it into it, Scott muttered, “At least when I’m feeling nostalgic, I just look at old photographs. I don’t feel the need to fire up my time machine and bring people forward from the past.”

“No, you just skipped off to a dimension with a non-hostile Logan and a not-dead Kurt. Nothing revealing about that at all. And, no, Emma, before you ask, there is now no danger of any facial scarring but that stuff still costs six thousand dollars an ounce to make and I will be sending you the bill.”

“You’re the ones who handed him over to torturers,” Emma reminded him. “I think the least you can do is provide free medical care afterwards.”

Scott said in confusion, “I thought that stuff was to prevent infection? Six thousand dollars an ounce?”

“Worth every penny,” Emma purred.

Logan said with what he felt was commendable patience: “You wouldn’t be a little pissy if I ran off and had sex with a you from a different dimension? Seven times.” Not that anyone’s counting.

With his hand clutched to his pounding head, Scott looked genuinely bemused. “Why would I be? Are you going to do that now? Which me? From which dimension? You know the one from Howlett’s is only nineteen, right? That’s around the age I was when you first met me and we both know how well that went. I think Alison’s dating the Confederacy era one. There was some kind of town sheriff guy, Howlett mentioned. He might be up for it, although Howlett never said if he was gay….” He sounded maddeningly okay about it, although somewhat surprised.

“No! I’m not gonna…!” Unlike you, I don’t think all cats are gray in the dark, guy who married his first love’s clone and who just banged a guy with my DNA! As Scott flinched at his raised voice, Logan made the effort to lower his tone. “That was just…hypothetical. But you need to get it through your thick head…."

“Logan, please, I have a steel band playing in my brain right now and lots of small angry people in there who keep stabbing me behind the eyes. I don’t care who you sleep with as long as you do it quietly, and I don’t understand why you care who I sleep with either.”

“Because you slept with…me!”

“He’s nothing like you. And please God stop yelling.”

“No, he’s all good and kind and nice and patient, isn’t he?”

“Is this about a version of you being gay?”

“No, of course it isn’t. Why the hell would it be?”

Scott said wearily, “Then I don’t even know what conversation we’re having here – and doesn’t anyone on this billion dollar plane have any damn Tylenol? I thought you liked Howlett? He likes
you.”

“I liked him fine until he fucked my…!” Logan broke off because ‘friend’ was not what Scott Summers was to him any more.

Scott was still entirely failing to get it. “You did get that it was consensual, right? Howlett was nothing other than kind to me.”

_Could hardly have been more consensual, could it? You’d have worn holes in your knees sucking his dick if he’d let you, because Howlett’s just that dweamy._ Aloud, Logan said, “Yeah, rookie mistake right there. I need to put him straight on that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Kind isn’t what you need right now. In fact, kind is the last thing you need.”

“I thought it made a nice change.”

“It damn near got you killed!”

Clutching his head, Scott turned to Rogers as the man came over, tall and broad-shouldered and handsome and not at all happy about the current state of affairs or anything he had learned inside Scott Summers’ head. Scott, of course, remained blissfully unaware of how miserable he had made everyone. “Captain, I don’t want to tell you your job, but if you’re my jailor right now then you have a moral obligation to shut Logan up or to humanely kill me, preferably both.”

Sternly, Rogers said, “Before I do either of those things, Summers, you and I need to have a talk.”

Wearily, Scott swung himself off the gurney and at a warning look from McCoy as his fingers went to the needle in his arm, took a reluctant hold of his drip stand, dragging it after him like a burden. He would have told McCoy to get lost on anything else, but McCoy had been his doctor for too many years for his authority in that area not to still carry weight. Logan could just glimpse all the past Scott Summers who had been scolded and patched up and scolded some more by all those past McCoys just under the surface of this Scott.

“Wait!” McCoy took the water glass from Scott, refilled it, and handed it back to him. “Keep drinking. You need fluids.”

“I’m on a drip.”

“Are you arguing with me about medical matters?”

“No,” said Scott pettishly. “I’m drinking my water.” And did so, in a way that still signaled resentment with every sip.

McCoy said, “Your blood pressure’s still too low for me to give you any morphine, Scott. I’m not leaving you in pain because I enjoy watching you suffer…that’s just a coincidental bi-product.”

Scott grinned at McCoy over his shoulder because the oddest things had always amused him. “You should teach Young You to get in touch with his inner bastard earlier, Henry. Think of all the fun he’s missing out on.”

Logan knew perfectly well why McCoy was wincing; Scott’s still-boyish smile did that to everyone these days. McCoy took off his glasses and rubbed wearily at his eyes and Logan just knew he was seeing his young self and Scott’s young self, who were still the best of friends and could imagine no
path by which they might ever become enemies. “Tylenol probably won’t kill him if anyone feels like giving them to him,” McCoy said.

Frost said quietly to Scott, “Are you okay?”

He nodded. “Headache. Otherwise fine. You?”

She said, “No.” It covered a lot of ground and he winced in sympathy.

“I’m sorry. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not with you, darling. Natasha and I have a date for dealing with the day’s fallout. Alcohol in copious quantities will almost certainly be consumed.”

Scott just nodded, as if that sounded perfectly reasonable to him, and turned to Magneto. “I’m sorry about the telepathic mind-flail, Erik.”

“Not your fault,” the man said gravely. “You did very well under the circumstances. It’s just your being in that position in the first place that I question – and, no, I’m not talking about the mistakes made by the Avengers. Emma and I have already discussed that. You and I will need to have a conversation about your part in this later.”

Logan suspected that if Scott hadn’t had a visor to hide behind he would have dropped his gaze around then. He also suspected that the only reason Magneto wasn’t angrier with him than he was for trying to cash in his chips and then nearly giving away every secret they possessed was because Scott had managed to keep the location of their school hidden. Scott still looked like a guy who had just been told the headmaster would be seeing him in his office after detention but nodded manfully. “Whenever you want.”

“Slim being in that position is what everyone wants to talk to him about,” Logan said grimly.

Hawkeye fixed Scott with a fulminating eye as they passed his seat, voice trembling with emotion: “Incidentally, Summers, has it ever occurred to you that, when some depraved nymphomaniac – and if the cap fits, Frost! – is coming onto you, wanting you to try some new pervy thing in bed, that you could maybe say ‘No.’ Or ‘Rain check?’ or even ‘Only if you use some fucking lube’?”

“Are you going to cry, Barton?” Frost enquired loftily. “Because you look like you’re going to cry. And for your information, Scott has declined many sexual overtures over the years, including a threesome with Henry and myself. It wasn’t actually what I was suggesting, but he thought it was, and he did turn it down.”

“Really?” McCoy bridled. “So – a threesome with a man he barely knows and one he’s just met, is hunky dory, but sex with Emma and myself that’s just too…out there? How am I not supposed to find that furrist?”

“It wasn’t a fur thing,” Scott said, looking more confused than ever, as he clung to the drip stand to stay upright. “It was a not being into threesomes thing.”

“Well, I see you’ve overcome that little hang-up and how.”

“I just felt like letting go, and, anyway, Henry, why do you care? You’re straight.”

“Well, so were you, a week ago.”

Logan watched Scott flinching from the pain in his head, tone quiet and weary, because he’d had a
house-full of spectators trampling through his mind, and now had the migraine to end all migraines, and a body still hurting from the physical abuse from before, as well as the twanging reverberations from all of those memories of other days and other soul-stripping pain. Mostly though, he had just thought it would all be over by now, and here he was back in the land of the not being tortured to death by government stooges, and he’d not been planning any further than that. Logan thought the guy should still be on suicide watch; having been in his tangled head for all those hours, he knew how many sticks Scott had to beat himself with, and there were more there than even the most ardent masochist could enjoy.

Still with a hand clasped to his thumping head, Scott made to slump into one of the corner seats but Rogers took Scott by the elbow, like he was a bratty kid, and marched him over to what he evidently imagined was out of earshot, Scott stumbling a little from his migraine and irritably tugging his drip stand after him while trying not to spill his water. Logan, of course, could still hear every word. “Summers, why didn’t you tell me you suspected those people weren’t kosher?”

“What did it matter?” Scott pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead. “You’d tell me if there was brain actually oozing out of my ears, right…?”

Irritably, Rogers grabbed the painkiller bottle, and – being that guy – made sure he put four dispersible aspirin into Scott’s water glass so he would have to obey doctor’s orders and drink it all to get his pain relief. Scott – who was also that guy so got exactly what Rogers was doing and why – began swallowing the water down with more martyred resignation.

“Logan worked it out. He said you knew all the time. He said you said goodbye to him because you knew those people were going to make you disappear.”

Still holding his head, Scott said, “So…? I told him last time. We both know where that got me. I thought repeating the same action while expecting a different result was the definition of madness.” He clutched his head tighter, saying, through gritted teeth, “And if Logan had just done the decent thing and killed me when I wanted him to, I wouldn’t have this migraine.”

Logan snorted. “Suck it up, Slim. I’m not cutting your head off just because it hurts.”

“I always knew you were a closet sadist,” Summers muttered, rubbing his temples.

Rogers removed the glass from Scott’s hand, gave it to Logan, then took Scott by the shoulders and gave him an uncharacteristically rough shake. “Summers! You don’t just go off with the bad guys! We were right there, Logan and I and Tony and Hawkeye – one word, that was all it would have taken, so why didn’t you say it?”

Scott made a strangled protest at what being shaken did to his head but said quietly: “What possible reason did I have to imagine that you’d intervene even if I did? And what does it matter now anyway? Did you get anything from them?”

“Tony got everything off their hard drive before Logan lost his temper with their equipment, so Hill’s hoping we can work out how they’re infiltrating S.H.I.E.L.D. And it ‘matters’, Summers, because those maniacs could have cut you up just to watch you bleed, and a lot of good men and women have risked their lives to keep you breathing in and out over the years, your dead wife, Logan, Miss Frost over there, and myself included, and it isn’t fair to make all our work for nothing.”

“Rogers, I can’t tell the difference between Good S.H.I.E.L.D. and Bad S.H.I.E.L.D. Whatever hat they’re wearing, mutants still tend to get screwed over. Maybe you should let them get infiltrated more often; just by the law of averages some of the people that did it might not be unquestioning government puppets.”
McCoy murmured, “‘Hate and mistrust are the children of blindness.’ And finish your water or you’re going to have that headache for a week.”

Scott snatched the glass back from Logan and finished the last few gulps then shoved the empty glass back at Logan, but said, “Tell that to the people who spend their lives trying to end ours, Henry, not me. For the record – if we’re at a place where I really have to spell it out – I don’t hate or mistrust any of you. I never have and I never could. And that includes everyone on this plane, including the people who tried to kill me not that long ago. I know you are heroes who try, endlessly, to do the right thing, I know you fail some of the time. I know that failure isn’t through any want of trying. I just wish you’d extend even a fraction of that courtesy to the rest of us.”

The clink of ice cubes suggested that Stark was trying another method than aspirin to battle his headache. “Why not just admit you think we’re self-righteous hypocritical assholes who don’t give a flying fuck about you or your species and be done with it, Summers? I mean Miss Frost, here, has already shared her views.”

Wearily, Scott said, “Well, given that you all just risked your necks to save me from a secret prison and then apparently spent the next three hours being tortured by some form of chemically induced telepathy on my part, I thought it might seem a little ungracious.”

“Three hours, thirty-two minutes, and seventeen seconds. Not that anyone’s counting,” Hawkeye said. “And a secret prison stuck right down the ass end of the Andes, by the way, but we’re not bitter about having had to give up the best part of a day to fly backwards and forwards up and down fricking South America either. Really.”

“Also, I would never say anything like that about Natasha because I think she might do truly terrible things to me in retribution.”

Crisply, Romanoff said, “You’re not wrong.”

“I thought being tied up by sexually aggressive women was your comfort zone, Cyclops?” Hawkeye muttered, still bitterly.

“The Madelyne I married was nothing like…”

“Clone, Summers! She was a fricking clone! Your first wife was a clone of your second wife. You do get how nuts that sounds? You do get that normal men don’t have things like that happen to them? They also don’t get raised by crazy geneticists who are obsessed with their DNA – not if they’ve got any damned sense.” Hawkeye took the glass from Stark and downed its contents. “The guy made a back-up copy of Jean Grey. Is there anyone here who doesn’t think Sinister made back-up copies of Summers? What do you suppose he did with them? I don’t even want to think about it. Except, there will be a zoo, somewhere. There’ll be the Nathaniel Essex Clone Zoo of Grey-Summers Science Experiments with visiting hours and feeding times and…”

Stark said laconically, “Natasha – slap Barton. He’s hysterical.”

“He’ll be breeding them. It’s obvious that he’ll be breeding them. Every subsequent generation will consist of more and more predatory redheaded women and even more pussy-whipped pretty boys. Sinister probably has enough to populate a small country by now….”

A slap resounded. Romanoff handed Stark back his glass and returned to the pilot controls.

Rogers said, “This isn’t over, Summers. What you did today isn’t acceptable.”

“Well, as you feel so strongly about it, I’ll be sure to file a flight plan with you next time I fancy
flying MartyrAir.”

“Next time call a Suicide Hotline,” Rogers told him firmly. “What you did wasn’t fair to Logan.”

Logan was absolutely sure that, behind that visor, Scott was rolling his eyes like a fishwife. “What? He doesn’t like it when I wanted him to kill me and now he doesn’t like it when I make sure the job’s being done by someone else…?”

Logan realized he was still holding the guy’s damned glass and tossed it onto the nearest flat surface because he was not running errands for Scott fucking Summers any more. “There’s just no pleasing some people, is there, Cyke?”

“Apparently not.” Scott sat down on one of the comfortable leather seats, and glowered at his pursuing drip resentfully.

Logan slammed him back against the seat back, fingers twisted in the nice clean shirt McCoy had dressed him in and put his face very close to Scott’s, voice his most chilling snarl: “Well, next time, try not fucking killing yourself. Or I’ll make you wish you were not only dead but had never been born, and I’ll do it slowly, and often, and you wouldn’t believe how much I can make it hurt.”

Summers had the sense to shiver, but his low, dangerous: “You don’t get to tell me what to do, Logan…” was a gauntlet across the face challenge. Logan felt the familiar flare of anger and arousal and something that was just sheer pleasure, because Scott was pushing back again.

“Mine is a really big school, Slim. Be a shame if I lost you in some soundproofed back room in the basement and forgot to tell anyone else I had you chained up there. Maybe having me as your only visitor for a few months might finally make you see sense…”

Behind the visor, red light flared angrily and Logan didn’t want to admit how hot this was making him or how much he was enjoying himself as he pushed Scott right to the edge of losing his temper. Scott probably hadn’t noticed that his legs had opened instinctively, but Logan had and he wanted to push a bulky thigh between them and start rubbing.

“You’d never hold me.”

“Oh, you’d keep getting free – you’re good at that – but, trust me, I’d keep hunting you down and dragging you back before you got away, and even if you did manage to slip through my fingers, Krak’d just scoop you up and toss ya back to me. Might even be worth letting you go on purpose – just for the fun of catching you again. You wanna try your luck against Krak and me?”

Scott said harshly, “Why don’t you just…?”

Logan dragged him in even closer, until their mouths were almost touching and his own harsh, angry pants were gusting hot breath against Summers’ parted lips. “Finish that sentence, Scott. I dare you.”

“Go fu–”

That was when the blast wave made the whole plane rock.

“Oh my stars and garters,” McCoy murmured, “I’ve heard of unresolved sexual tension, but this is ridiculous.”

“Logan and I didn’t do that,” Scott pointed out. “That was an explosion from outside the plane.”

Logan was disappointed to realize that Scott was right and it hadn’t been his repressed emotions
about Scott first sleeping with Howlett and then trying to get himself killed that had ignited something in the atmosphere. When he looked out of the window, he could see that the mountain beneath them had a new hole in the side and there were flames pouring out of it.

As Jarvis told them that what they were looking at was a mine in Honduras that had just exploded, thermal imaging suggesting there were at least eighteen dead, and twenty-nine survivors, currently trapped in a chamber in which the air was rapidly being poisoned by chemical fumes from the broiling hell caverns below that the explosion had caused, Logan noticed an immediate change in Scott even before he’d finished pulling the drip out of his arm. It wasn’t that the man craved disaster, it was just that disaster was what he knew. So, this – lives hanging in the balance and Scott’s life needing to be risked, this was familiar, perhaps it was even comforting. So, the weary, headache-racked guy he’d been looking at, the one who would keep toiling because if he didn’t no one else would, but didn’t enjoy it, and would have been a little grateful to be murdered – that guy was gone. The one in his place was the Scott Summers he and McCoy both knew at a glance; brain working overtime to come up with a strategy to save the day, headache ruthlessly suppressed, along with his bodily exhaustion, the ache of his cracked ribs, and the aftershocks from being tortured, everything sublimated to make way for Cyclops, leader of the X-Men, Savior of the Imperiled. This guy was upright, focused, poised, ready for anything the world might throw at him.

Along with the Avengers, he was already taking in data and formulating strategies, and Logan could practically see the circuitry in his brain lighting up. Him and Rogers working on the same side was something to see, because they both had the kind of minds that Logan didn’t: the ones that could come at a problem from twenty angles at once, discarding inferior solutions in a heartbeat and zeroing in on the shortlist with the highest probability of success.

Jarvis was maintaining a quiet stream of information: he could determine no obvious cause, as yet, for the explosion, although the heat signature he was reading suggested a sudden fire had flared into the area where the miners were working, causing the air to combust. Those furthest from the initial blast had been able to get to safety. The others had been incinerated. The nearest village to the mine lay at the foot of the mountain and comprised some eight hundred people. The mountain was, oddly, called El Dragón Dormido, The Sleeping Dragon, although it was not and never had been volcanic, although its chemical composition did share some inexplicable correlations to metamorphic rock, leaving the cause of the initial explosion a perplexing mystery. The chamber in which the surviving miners were currently sheltering was unstable and only accessible from above. The previous main entrance to the mine had been completely obliterated in the firestorm from the lower levels.

Listening intently to everything Jarvis was saying, Scott said, “So…only the one access, through the new fissure in the rock above the main cavern where the survivors are gathered. How big is the entry point?”

When Jarvis gave the dimensions – imperial and metric so there could be no confusion – Logan did the math in his head and saw everyone else do it, too. His shoulders were too broad, so were Beast’s, so were Cap’s, so were Magneto’s. Hawkeye might be able to do it if he breathed in. Summers, Frost, and Romanoff would all be able to get through, although in Summers’ case only at one angle if he didn’t want to dislocate his shoulder.

Stark said, “I can get through that.”

Summers and Cap both said, “Not wearing the suit.”

“I’m not just a suit, you know. I am also a handsome debonair genius inventor billionaire playboy superhero.”
“You missed out egomaniac,” Romanoff drawled.

“Well, I don’t like to blow my own trumpet. Seriously, Steve – tricky situations are pretty much what I do, in or out of the suit.”

“But you don’t have super-strength or optic blasts,” Summers’ brain was working as he spoke, there was no sting to the words, he was just assessing and adjusting for data, very much as Stark did himself. “And there’s not enough room in there, going by this 3D projection from Jarvis, for the suit to fly in after you so you can put it on, and if two plates touch each other or touch the walls at any point you’re going to ignite a firestorm. Hawkeye could probably get in there, but I’m not sure how useful he’d be. Ditto for Romanoff – unless we urgently need someone in that unstable mountain beaten up.”

Coolly, Romanoff said, “I do other things.”

“But I’m thinking there’s not much infiltration, seduction, interrogation, or execution needed in this situation either. You need someone who can keep the mountain off the miners and that’s no one else here.” From behind his visor, Summers face was a picture of stoic sincerity. “Rogers, it has to be me.”

“Half an inch of clearance, Summers, and that’s if you get the perfect trajectory. Also, how are you planning…?”

Scott said, “Either wire-slide from a Barton-assisted cable or Stark can lower me in on a pulley,” as Stark offered the same two options in reverse order. Scott was already turning to Magneto. “Erik, you see all the metal girders in there? They should be enough to create a protective cage. Can you…”

“Can either of us?” Erik countered. “We’re not who we were.”

“We’ve been practicing.”

“But there’s no margin of error. In the past, yes, we could have done this easily, but we’re not a good first choice.”

Scott pointed to the readings. “The air’s getting more flammable every minute, the mine working is critically unstable, and there are nearly thirty people in there still showing life signs. One spark and they’re gone forever. I can physically get through the hole in the ceiling. Then it’s up to you and me to make our powers work right.”

Rogers turned to Logan, “What do you think…?”

Logan said, “You should let him do this.”

“He’s a wanted fugitive, with cracked ribs and a death-wish, whose mutant ability is currently only imperfectly under his control.”

Logan said impatiently, “The ribs don’t matter. Nothing’s sticking through his lung. He’ll just mentally block out the pain signals until the mission’s over - he’s done it before. And he’s not gonna kill himself when there are humans who need his help.”

McCoy said, “Steve, Scott Summers has many faults, which, given enough alcohol, I will catalogue for anyone who will listen in meticulous detail, but one thing he can do is team-lead a rescue mission. The man has literally done it with his eyes closed, and right now he’s your first best choice. It’s that or you dislocate both your shoulders.” McCoy blinked. “My God, you’re actually considering
Option B.”

“*I could put them back afterwards….*”

“*Not, if you’ve passed out from the agony, dropped your shield, causing a spark, igniting a conflagration of hero-devouring intensity. Steve, those miners have ten minutes or less before the breathable air is gone, because the oxygen is rising up while the heavier toxic gases are staying low, and the mix is getting less easy for human lungs to cope with every second. Let Scott do what he can do to save them. We can hold the pissing contest afterwards.*”

Rogers said, with dignity, “*This was never about jurisdiction. Summers – tell me exactly what you need us to do…?*”

Even as Scott explained his strategy, the Avengers were making it happen, throwing each other the necessary equipment, obtaining the necessary readings, all at breakneck speed, all as Stark shot out rapid fire information that added up to: it was dangerous but it was doable and it needed to be done now or not at all.

Rogers rested his hands on Scott’s shoulders and said with great authority, “*Listen. I don’t like you doing this but I will consent to it on one condition: that you recognize that this is a joint Avengers-X-Men mission and that it is under my command. Are we in agreement?*”

Logan could practically see Scott running the options and hitting the wall Rogers had known he would have to hit: he was on an Avengers quinjet, not one of his own Blackbirds, and he needed access to Avengers resources and back-up to make the plan work. He couldn’t even get in there without a lift from either Stark or Barton. That meant he worked under Rogers or he turned his back on those injured men down there. Scott said, “*You’re not giving me a lot of options here, Captain.*”

Rogers said, unrepentantly, “*That was the idea. Do you accept that I have ultimate authority on this mission or not?*”

“*Accepted.*”

“*That means when I tell you it’s time to get out of there, you do it. Understood?*”

Scott said mildly, “*It’s like you think I’m difficult to work with or something.*”

“*Summers!*”

“*Understood. You, as leader of the Avengers, have ultimate authority for this mission – if absolutely nothing else.*”

“I hate the Hawkeye part of the plan,” Stark said as they stood peering down at that huge blast crater south of the entry point, belching flame, and the impossibly small aperture in the smoking rock as Romanoff piloted the plane into position. “Metal-tipped arrow winging its way into powder keg…? One spark, Summers….”

Scott pointed at the schematic Jarvis had so obligingly provided. “*Metal girders either side of a wooden upright in the ideal position, given the right flight trajectory – which Romanoff can provide – for the wire to be at the perfect angle for me to slide down it and land here – bang on target. Barton just has to hit the upright and not the girder.*”

Emma Frost said tautly, “*Stark’s right. If Barton misses…*”

Scott said quietly, “*Do you know how difficult it is to score a direct hit on the carotid artery of a*
moving target from a safe distance? All we’re talking about here is a four-inch upright less than a hundred yards away. Barton can do this in his sleep.”

Hawkeye sucked in a breath and said, “Well, that’s the weirdest vote of confidence I’ve ever had. I should shoot you more often just for the affirmation. Now, get up here, Summers, and let me explain how you need to do this.”

They were hauling the harness they had cannibalized onto Scott even as they talked him through it, snapping safety catches closed, tugging straps tight; Rogers, rightly ignoring the unpleasant to concentrate on the essential, was checking every buckle with deft, efficient jerks, which Scott bore unflinchingly despite his cracked ribs, while Hawkeye spelled out the trajectory and speed, and Stark showed him how the fire-suppressing spray worked. “Like Clint says, you have to go in upside-down and head first, arms stretched to their full extent, because you have got to make that place less flammable before you engage the braking mechanism with your feet – preferably before you smash head first into the rock wall – because we don’t have the damn rubberized brake here, and this is a metal grip. And remind me never to leave home without a non-sparking pulley system again.”

“You found a work around for the brake-spark problem in twenty-eight seconds, Stark, cut yourself some slack. Spray then brake – I’ve got it. Move on.”

Cap strapped on the headlight with camera attachment, and added the communicator. “I know you’re used to working with telepathy, Summers, but we’re sticking with old-fashioned comm channels for this mission. Don’t keep anything to yourself. I want to see what you can see and I want you to share every thought in your head. Understood?”

Scott said, “Yes, Captain,” without irony, because he had agreed this was a mission under Roger’s command, and in the days before he’d become a good general, Scott had been a good captain, and the days before he’d been that, he’d been Xavier’s loyal lieutenant, so he recognized a fellow soldier when he saw one and he could slot into the infrastructure at a lower level just like in the old days. And also probably – Logan was willing to concede the point – because Scott had had a lot of practice at having to deal tactfully with Namor, difficult scientists, and Logan himself, in comparison with which Rogers was probably his dream-date.

Hawkeye was fidgeting with the frustration of not being the one to do the maneuver himself, but he still took aim in the breath-stealing shriek of an open aircraft door, adjusted for wind-speed and velocity, and then let the arrow fly, whipping through the clouds, the wire cable snaking behind it, reflecting silvery drops of light. It landed, inevitably, dead center of the target, buried deep enough in the wood that it wasn’t coming out without a lot more weight than Cyke’s pulling on it, all without a single spark.

Scott nodded to Hawkeye. “Good shot.”

“I don’t need praise from a wanted felon, Summers.”

Scott was slim enough, even with the size of the aperture he was going to have to slide through, for there to be room around his waist for McCoy to strap a belt of emergency medical supplies. McCoy thrust bandages and splints into pouches, and added morphine bottles and needles and remote monitors that he asked Scott to put on every patient – with their permission – so he could keep an eye on their condition and they could react accordingly if anyone started to crash. “From the heat signatures it looks like at least one compound fracture to me. There’s not much you can do about head injuries but you could splint anything that looks like it desperately needs it before transit to minimize blood loss and shock.”

Scott nodded to Stark. “If we have to go with Plan 4 and airlift the smaller ones out one at a time,
you’re going to have to run that from up here.”

“Well, given that I was successfully saving civilian lives while you were still playing Little League, Summers, and also given that I have an IQ about five times the size of yours, I’ll see if I can muddle through without you holding my hand, you arrogant little twerp.”

Logan wondered if Scott, with his crappy people skills, had any inkling that the reason Stark and Barton were snapping at him like bitchy piranhas was because they were worried he was about to get himself killed doing what they considered to be their job.

Scott grinned unexpectedly, apparently tickled by the insult. “Sometimes I get what it is Emma likes about you, Stark.”

Always when he did that Logan wished he wouldn’t, because he looked so boyish and innocent when he smiled, and that was just an illusion now. This version of Scott Summers was too chewed up and spat out to ever be that sweet-faced kid again.

As Scott dived backwards elegantly out of a moving airplane to wrap himself around the glinting cable and begin his swift slide to that small gap in the smoking rock, Stark said thoughtfully to Emma, “Is it weird that I kind of want to have sex with your ex now?”

Emma cast a glance at Logan that was far from friendly. “Take a number, Tony, and get in line.”

And it wasn’t like Logan and Slim had ever been able to exchange much in the way of meaningful glances. Stark and Rogers could stare into each other’s eyes until Hawkeye started humming the porntrack music, but he and Scott had never had that luxury, so there had been no long, lingering look from Scott Summers before he threw himself toward the smoldering abyss, and never would have been. But – significantly, Logan thought – there had been nothing approaching the ‘last words Cyke thought Logan would want to hear to get him through the next eternity’ speech either, and Logan was taking that as good sign. Cyke wasn’t hurling down a thinly twanging cable, heading at breakneck speed for a tiny hole in an unstable mountain because he wanted to die, he was doing it because he wanted to save the people trapped down there.

Romanoff was crisply informing Stark why he and Summers would never work: “…A latent sadist and a latent masochist can work; a dom with a sub can work; a guy with daddy issues having a nervous breakdown can work with a guy with a frustrated father complex having a nervous breakdown, but you can’t just throw two masochistic emotional wrecks who secretly want to be dominated together, it would never work. That’s why Wolverine has dibs.”

As Stark said, “I’m not a latent masochist!” and got an incredulous snort from both Frost and Hawkeye, Logan said, “I’m not a latent sadist!” and got an even more incredulous snort from Romanoff.

Romanoff said, “Yes, you are. Just enough for Summers anyway.”

“Slim doesn’t get hot for me hitting him.”

“Not turned on, perhaps, but definitely…comforted because it’s something familiar he recognizes. It’s like you yelling at him, scratching yourself in unseemly places, or drinking too much beer. It’s part of his mental furniture now. He’d miss it if you stopped.”

With an intensity he hadn’t known he possessed on this subject, Logan said, “No, if I was with Cyke, it wouldn’t be like that. It wouldn’t be like it was before. I’d be better than that.”

An image briefly flashed into his mind of the two of them in formal wear, sitting stiffly on opposite
sides of a white-draped table while candles threw their reflected flames onto gleaming glassware and shining silverware and violins played. A suave sommelier proffered the wine list, Scott chewing on a breadstick while Logan, watching his mouth as he did so, ordered for them both….

Romanoff looked more pitying than contemptuous. “You are what you are, Wolverine, and you’ve been what you are for longer than most of us have been alive. Ironically, Summers is the one who’s fine with you being you. You’re the one who doesn’t like that guy. It isn’t Summers who secretly wants you to be more like Howlett.”

“Why would he?” Stark shrugged. “He has Howlett for that.”

And somehow he had his hand around Stark’s throat and had slammed him up against the wall of the jet, with something that was definitely a snarl breaking free from his throat.

Unflinchingly, Stark said, “Yeah, I see you’re coping with the competition about as well as I would have expected. How are those anger management classes working out for you, Logan?”

It was Frost, unexpectedly, who said, “Logan, you really are a very stupid little man, aren’t you? How many hours have you been in Scott’s head?” As he turned to her in annoyance, his grip tightening on Stark’s throat, she said, “Natasha’s right. Scott doesn’t want you to be more like Howlett, you utter cretin. He wants Howlett to be more like you. Beer breath, dubious personal hygiene, and darker cravings included. Howlett, in all his even-tempered, no inner demons decency, could only ever be a substitute for the complicated monster that is you.”

The way her blue gaze held his in that moment, he realized that he had forgotten how to breathe, and she had just done him a kindness that she did not think he deserved, and she had done it for Scott’s sake. He let Stark go and only realized when he did so that he had been gripping his throat a lot harder than he thought. His fingers had left bruises that stood out lividly; that didn’t stop him feeling angry with Iron Man but it did add to his usual shoulder sack of self-hatred. Stark said evenly, “Guess it’s time to suit up.”

On the monitor, Scott had slid cleanly through the jagged hole in the mountain, body perfectly angled in the only position where he could gain access without smashing his shoulder to pieces, and was spraying Stark’s spark-retardant aerosol into the atmosphere. It glittered briefly before it plastered itself across every surface. Ten feet from certain death head-on collision with a wall of rock, Summers slammed on the foot brakes. Metal brakes hit metal cable and sparked, light shavings spitting from the contact, and the faintly glittering solution Stark had mixed up in seconds from compounds out of the cleaning closet, wrapped itself around the sparks and smothered them gently into harmless vapor, just as Scott let himself drop, head and torso first, still gripping with his knees, as the brakes bit hard. As he jolted to a stop, just in time, and released the grip, he back-flipped off the cable and landed, exactly where the projected schematic had put him, on his feet in the square two feet of space not covered with the body of a choking, groaning miner. Overhead, the wire cable that had carried him there gleamed quietly, twanging from tension, the arrow in the wall, dead center on a four-inch stanchion, not shifting by the merest fraction of an inch.

Hawkeye let out a breath that Logan was sure he would have died rather than admit he was holding and said gruffly, “Parker would have done that with a quip but…not bad.”

Into the comm, Summers said quietly, “I know you don’t accept praise from wanted felons, Barton, but…good shot. And, Stark – good job with the oven-cleaner remix.”

Emma said, “All those years of trying to teach him that people work better when they are praised and now he finally gets it? Where were the bouquets when I was saving his neck far more stylishly?”
Stark shrugged. “Must be part of his post-coital glow.”

Logan kept his eyes on the monitor while stabbing a finger at Stark. “Shut up about Howlett or I really will kill you later.” He was still reeling from what Emma had said, because he knew that she at least believed it to be true. He also realized that there had been nothing at all in Scott’s head that contradicted it.

Rogers, who, along with Magneto, had never let his attention stray from the monitor, said, “Summers, let me see what we’re dealing with.”

As Scott obediently turned a standing circle to let the camera film the whole cavern, Logan grimaced, because it wasn’t looking good down there. The thickening air added to a hellish scene of injured men, many with that dazed look of those who had barely survived horror and had lost good friends in the process. They could, however, see that this chamber had been shored up, very efficiently, with a number of metal stanchions, and heavy-duty chain link bolted into the walls. All perfect materials with which Magneto could construct a protective cage if he could only persuade his powers to cooperate.

There were a lot of wounded miners, and the handful who weren’t injured had clearly damn near killed themselves getting the wounded to this place of temporary safety before the last explosion had caused more cave-ins that had trapped them here. No one was unbloodyed, most looked badly in need of medical help, some were in considerable pain. Scott did a quick assessment of the wounded, making rapid gestures to indicate that he had come from the plane above and help was on its way as he stuck the monitors on any undamaged bare flesh he could find, while letting the light and camera play on them so McCoy could see the situation before making his way over to where the most able-bodied were using the last of their strength to try to pickaxe their way out through a wall of debris.

That, of course, was when the Avengers noticed that Scott didn’t actually speak much Spanish.

“Seriously?” Hawkeye demanded. He did a rapid translation for Scott over the intercom, and then—as Scott held the communicator out where the chief miner, who introduced himself as Amado Girón, could hear him—passed on what Scott and Rogers had to say, adding as an aside: “No one thought it might be a problem sending the non-Spanish speaking guy into a place full of Honduran miners?”

“I knew you guys would find a work-around,” Scott returned calmly.

Hawkeye had been jibbing anyway so Logan didn’t blame him for taking this chance to follow Scott. “I’m going in there before monolingual boy causes an international incident. Give me a harness.” As they strapped him into it, he kept translating for Scott and telling him he should have studied harder at school when it came to those modern languages.

With the babelfishing assistance of Barton, Scott had explained to Girón what the problems were that they had yet to overcome, and what information they had for him on the rest of the miners whom his party had been cut off from by the explosion, neither of which was good. Girón, who had the quiet intensity of an unHulked Bruce Banner and looked as if he had been through a meat grinder, but insisted via Hawkeye that his own injuries were minimal, and that they needed to get the others stabilized, revealed himself to be swift of comprehension and action, taking Scott straight to the most badly wounded so he could do what he could for them with the medicine he had with him.

Coached by McCoy on the medical procedure and Hawkeye on the communication problem, Scott swiftly and efficiently set up a morphine drip for a miner with a badly broken femur—a slender, handsome boy, half out of his mind with pain, placed some considerable distance from the others, who looked barely seventeen and who was revealed to be Girón’s brother, Luis. The rest of the wounded were in a sprawled knot beneath the opening above, the light from which was dimming as
the day began to fade. Scott splinted two simple arm fractures, and began, under McCoy’s instructions shining a penlight into people’s eyes to check for reactive and equal pupils. So far, no one seemed to have obvious bleeding from the brain, but the boy with the fractured femur was in a bad way and some of the others didn’t look much better. Hawkeye was still rapidly giving Scott comforting things to say in Spanish and then complaining about the lousy accent with which Scott then said it.

“Kept prisoner in a fake orphanage by an immortal maniac who wanted to control every part of his environment for the purity of his experiment,” McCoy murmured. “I believe Scott was pretty much self-taught until Winters started letting him attend High School in between beatings and bank robberies. It’s really a credit to his native intelligence and self-discipline that he’s as well educated as he is.”

“That still isn’t how you pronounce ‘tablilla temporal’.”

Perfectly unmoved by Hawkeye’s criticisms, Scott said through the intercom, “Can you get Jarvis to check those readings again? Amado is adamant they could hear tapping on the north side of the wall. They didn’t think there were any miners in that part of the mine and I’ve shown him on the monitor that there are no life signs in the ones on the south side of the rockfall....”

“Those poor bastards to the south were charbroiled,” Stark said grimly. “According to the readings I’m getting, there was a flash fire in there right after the wall came down, and the heat hit two thousand kelvins. Even if those people were made of titanium they’d still be melted. The only good thing is it would have been over in a microsecond.”

Jarvis calmly confirmed that there was a very large cavern to the north of the chamber in which the miners were currently located but that the heat in it was in excess of anything that could sustain human life, although, curiously, the heat was not as yet bleeding into the connecting wall through the tunnel linking them. If that was the source of the tapping he could see no conceivable means by which it could be human in origin.

Hawkeye was still rapidly translating for Scott, who was, as per McCoy’s instructions, now with Girón accompanying him, going around the rest of the wounded. Scott said, “Awful lot of head injuries from the initial rock fall. No way of telling how serious they are. It’s too soon after the accident. We need to get them out of here as soon as possible so Henry can check cranial pressure.”

“Yes, Scott, being a qualified medical practitioner, unlike you, I do actually know that.”

Scott ignored that and just kept going, angling the camera down to show them the boy with the bone protruding from his femur whom his brother had placed so carefully over to one side to try to shelter him from the inevitable movements of the other wounded. “The morphine should have kicked in by now if it was going to and it hasn’t. I’m not a qualified medical practitioner but that still looks dangerously close to the femoral artery to me. Luis is still in too much pain to keep still while I immobilize his leg, and the metal stanchion that fell on him, smashing his thighbone, also crushed his chest, meaning his breathing is severely depressed and I don’t think he could take another dose of morphine even if it worked, which, at this level of pain, I don’t think it will. If we try to move him before we splint it, I’m worried the bone edge is going to sever the artery and he’ll bleed out. Any suggestions?”

Stark said, “Femoral nerve block?”

McCoy said, “Have you done one?”

“No. You?”
“Once, but I can’t get in there and I think it’s too risky for you to attempt it with an unanesthetized patient in a non-sterile environment with terrible visibility.”

Frost said, “Sounds like you need me in there.”

Scott said, “Emma, your telepathy…?”

“Will only work at very close quarters, yes. That’s why I need to be in there with him. Then I make the pain go away and we can immobilize his compound fracture without him bleeding to death. Or does anyone else have a better plan?” No one did. Logan realized Scott had managed to conceal that Emma’s powers weren’t working in the same place he’d hidden their HQ, and that Frost had been keeping it to herself until now as well. They really were an untrusting bunch. He kinda admired that about them.

Fixing the safety wire, Hawkeye said, “I’ll see to the wounded. Summers’ bedside manner sucks even when the people he’s talking to speak the same language as him. Summers I’m coming in.”

“We’d be glad of you down here, Barton,” Summers said.

That was when they all heard the tapping.

As Hawkeye looked a question at Rogers, the man nodded. “Get in there and help with the wounded. Jarvis recheck all your findings. There’s something else alive in there that isn’t the people we’ve accounted for. Summers, you’re freed up to look for other survivors. Hawkeye’s going to take over with the injured.” Hawkeye gave a brief nod and then began to speed down his own wire.

“Understood.” Scott climbed carefully over the groaning wounded, to get back over to the wall where the miners were calling through to whoever was on the other side to answer them, and tapping back. The tapping continued but in no particular pattern. It was impossible to tell if it was in response to their calls or not. Girón, who had dried blood on his forehead, and had, according to the other miners, coordinated their escape from the lower chambers, and the saving of the wounded they had managed to get out, looked exhausted, but he swung his pick with renewed energy.

“Scott could have optic blasted one brick-sized piece out of that cavern wall in the past without touching the rest of it in two seconds in the past,” Logan said through gritted teeth. He really did hate the fucking Phoenix Force and, fine, he was glad that they were no longer looking oblivion in the eye. He was glad mutants hitting puberty were becoming mutants again; but the emotional wreckage that damned firebird left behind in its chaotic creation of rebirth and renewal never got any easier to take. And he had been dumb enough to think that with Jean’s death that at least the Phoenix had done with hurting them.

Robbed of his optic blasts, Scott had picked up a pickaxe himself and was swinging in rhythm with Girón, to dislodge a jutting stone. Logan tried not to think about what that was doing to his broken ribs – no one else down there was in better shape than Scott, after all. Stark was hissing in frustration at not being able to get into the place – Jarvis confirmed once again that any attempt to widen the hole in the mountain would completely destabilize an already perilously unstable situation – while Magneto was quietly asking Jarvis to show him a composite of the cavern from the footage Scott had sent them and a full analysis of the amount of magnetite in the rock. “I can’t feel it as well as I used to,” he said.

With both Scott and Girón working at the wall, and the other walking wounded miners eagerly assisting them in pulling more rubble out, they managed to hack out a piece just large enough for someone as slim as Scott to wriggle through. Rogers, monitoring the structural integrity via Jarvis, told Scott that the wall they were digging at was in no way stable either and they needed to keep the
hole that size or else risk bringing down the ceiling. Magneto closed his eyes and made what was clearly a considerable effort – they saw on the monitor the stanchion that had been lifted from the miner with the broken femur, raise up and float over to the cavern wall they were excavating, where it shored up the wall. The miners exclaimed in surprise and Girón turned to Scott who pointed to the ceiling to indicate the quinjet hovering above the mountain. When he said ‘Avengers’ there was a gratified nod and murmur of approval. When he said ‘X-Men’ there was a general blank incomprehension.

“That’s a step up for us,” Logan grunted. “No one made the sign of the cross or spat on the floor.”

Over his shoulder, Rogers asked Romanoff if there was a way to raise the oxygen level in the main cavern, as it was still dropping, even with the hole in the ceiling. “Not without raising the flammability,” she admitted. “And it’s already a tinderbox in there.”

Asking Girón via Hawkeye to hang back in case he needed a rescue – for which he would yell accordingly – Scott slid otter-swift into the next cavern. As Scott wriggled through that jagged hole in the wall, Logan realized that he had been in his head for so many hours that day that he expected to feel the hotter air burning his lungs, the snag of the rock against his creaking ribs, but all he got was that jerky feed of glassy black rock and spits of yellow cloud, with no insight into Scott’s thoughts at all. He understood for the first time, how much Scott must miss having Emma in his head, and why he still felt the painful absence of his broken connection to Jean.

“Hurry up, Stark.” Frost rose to her thigh-booted feet. “That boy down there is clearly in considerable pain.”

Suited up, Stark said, “You trust me to fly you over a tiny hole in a burning mountain and safely lower you down there on a cable?”

She didn’t as much as blink. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Stark said, “I am never going to understand women.”

“Of course not.” Frost sounded amused. “The masculine brain has a finite capacity and we are far beyond its feeble comprehension – like whale-song and starlight.” She turned to Magneto. “Can you do it, Erik?”

“We’ll find out when Scott comes back.”

Logan’s attention was torn between watching Hawkeye make a close to perfect landing in the cavern, Stark fly Frost out into the smoking, sullen air belching up from the mountain, and Scott crawling through a claustrophobic tunnel of razor sharp black rock.

McCoy said, “Why is there obsidian all over a non-volcanic mountain? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Romanoff said, “That can’t be doing Summers' ribcage any good and it’s slicing up his hands and knees like rough sex on razorblades.”

“He’s still in better shape than most of those miners,” Rogers said, watching all the monitors. “Tony, you’re right over the target. Miss Frost, remember one spark from those terrifying heels of yours and the whole place could go up. Jarvis – air quality? How long do they have?”

“Two minutes before brain function will begin to be affected.”

“Lehnsherr? Are you up to this?”
“It looks as if I have to be,” the man returned with quiet gravity.

As Scott wriggled the last jagged, razor-rock-strewn yard of tunnel to reach the smoking hole that led into the cavernous red-lit chamber beyond, Logan said a soft, grim, “Fuck.”

And then they all saw what he was looking at as the tapping came again. It was the negligent twitching of the very tip of the tail of an enormous, heat-glowing monster, its veins glowing with what looked like lava beneath the surface of its red and black body, that was even now clawing at the glassy black wall that divided it from the south chamber beyond. It had already hooked out one charbroiled corpse and was eating it with every sign of relish.

McCoy said, “I think we can take it that it likes its food well done. Scott, get the hell out of there now.”

“We’re five miles from a town with eight hundred people in it, this creature seems to have woken up with a craving for barbecued homo sapien, and I’m in the perfect position to take a shot. If Emma and Erik get the miners out of there, the second they’re clear, I hit it with everything I’ve got.”

“And most likely bring the mountain down on your head,” Rogers said sharply. “Summers, this is a joint mission under my command. That was what you agreed to and I am ordering you to get back into the main chamber and help Senor Girón to prepare for survivor evac. Do you hear me?”

There was an infinitesimal pause in which Logan could just imagine the guy who had run his own missions for over a decade jibbing at taking orders from an Avenger, and then, because Scott had indeed agreed to go in as part of a joint initiative under Rogers’ command and he was a man of his word, he said, “I hear you. Returning now.”

Logan let out a breath, but aloud he only said, “Sure you’re making the right call? I’ve seen him turn a Sentinel into a smoking crater. That creature’s a little bigger, but Slim should still be able to make it a bad memory.”

“He fires an optic blast from that position, he brings the mountain down on his head – and he knows it. That’s why he wanted the miners out first. Scott Summers is not killing himself on my watch even to take out a giant fire-breathing dragon.”

“Cyke’s still right about that village and all its crunchy inhabitants being too damned close to a people-munching monster with wings.”

Rogers said firmly, “And we’re going to stop it before it reaches those people. We’re just going to find another way.”

Romanoff said, “That thing isn’t a ‘dragon’ because we’re not in Cyclops’ Toga Party World, so what is it and are we allowed to kill it?”

McCoy said, “My money would be on it being one of the Mole-Man’s creations. They do tend to pop up from time to time although not usually this far south.”

Over the intercom, a coughing Hawkeye said, “Cap, the people of this area have a folktale about this mountain, and apparently it’s that when the dragon awakens it’s game over. There’s a seer in the village who can see disaster coming and in her visions the dragons turns everyone to ash. Some people think she’s a witch, others think she’s an angel sent to watch over them, but she sounds like a mutant to me. Basically, her prophecy says we kill it or it really is ‘rocks fall everybody dies’ time. Also, the air down here is getting really hard to breathe.”

“See if Frost can reach it. If there’s a consciousness there.”
“She’s kinda busy, Cap.”

“Just do it.”

On the monitor, they could see Frost, who was kneeling on the ground, incongruously unspoiled amidst all that blood and dirt and smoke, her hand on the young miner’s head. As they watched, he slumped into unconsciousness. Only then did Frost deign to wipe the blood from her nose. Clearly, she said, “Rogers, I am keeping this young man under and I am going to reduce the fracture on his leg, which given the shattered mess that is his thighbone and the close proximity of the break to his femoral artery is not a task I care to rush. When that is done, I will splint it up. Then and only then, I may have some leisure time to try to mind-meld with the fire-breathing monster next door. Until then, I suggest you try and find another way to persuade it not to eat everyone, and, no, for your information, unlike Scott I did not sign up to be under your command. These days I’m not under anyone’s command. I’m finding it quite refreshing.”

Jarvis announced that the air quality in the cavern would now have to be designated ‘very poor’. Logan said, “Frost’s stubborn as all hell. She won’t budge until she’s got that kid stabilized.”

Rogers said sharply, “McCoy, get some air-breathing equipment for Miss Frost and her patient. Tony get back here and get ready to deliver it.”

Frost was already telling Magneto that everyone except she and her patient were ready for transfer. He said, “Emma, I’m not as tidy at this as I used to be. If I destabilize that cavern while you’re still in it….”

“I will discover once again that diamonds truly are a girl’s best friend. Now, Erik.”

Stark had flown back to the ship at lightning speed while McCoy had grabbed the portable oxygen and masks and tossed them to him as he flew up. “Has anyone tried reasoning with her?” Stark demanded.

McCoy said, “To Emma’s eyes that boy is a child. Emma Frost does not have many weaknesses, but protecting children happens to be one of them. There is no argument you could make that would change her mind – and she is, of course, absolutely correct that moving him before that fracture’s been reduced, will almost certainly sever his femoral artery on the broken edge of the bone and kill him. Also, you may have noticed that the poor boy looks not unlike Young Scott, making any chance you had of getting through to her hit zero.”

“They’re out of air,” Romanoff said tautly. “We’re going to have multiple cases of carbon monoxide poisoning if Magneto doesn’t get everyone out of there now.”

Stark flew down at speed, shouted down to Hawkeye to give the masks to Emma, and then hovered anxiously, like a large metallic humming bird. The sunset, grainy with belching black smoke, was particularly beautiful behind him.

“Not the worst last sight to ever see,” McCoy murmured.

Rogers said, “Everyone in that mountain and that village is going to see other sunsets and, most importantly, they are going to see the sun come up tomorrow, and so are we.” He turned to Magneto. “You’re up, Lehnsherr.”

The man nodded and rose to his feet, inner preparation already done. He issued concise orders. Down in the cavern, a coughing Hawkeye had grabbed Scott and shoved him into the knot of miners. A wheezing Scott was looking back at Emma and Hawkeye said, “Summers – you need to
blast the damned ceiling now or no one gets out of here. Magneto can’t break through the rock like he used to. He doesn’t have the power.” As Scott looked back at Emma again, she, somehow making even an oxygen mask look like a high fashion accessory, made an elegant gesture indicating the rocky overhang protecting her and her patient. She waved a dismissive hand to Girón and Hawkeye grabbed him by the elbow and dragged him into the knot of wounded that Magneto needed to cage, raise, and protect. Several of them had passed out, the others were struggling for breath. Scott, broken ribs already making him breathe shallowly, and with his clothes cut to ribbons from crawling across razor rocks, fell to one knee and Hawkeye said, “Now, Lehnsherr!”

They could hear the sound of the rocks tearing even on the plane as the support girders were wrenched free and the chain link, used by the mining company to hold back the loose rubble, was now utilized by Magneto to wrap around the girders. With an effort clearly so colossal that Logan wondered if he could possibly survive it, Magneto focused all his attention on forming a protective metal cage around the wounded.

Rogers said sharply, “Tony! Get out of the way! Summers – blast a hole in the roof.”

Scott was barely conscious, but he put his head up, put what was clearly a huge effort of concentration into focusing and let loose a brilliant flare of red that ripped open the mountain above them and set debris cascading. Magneto made a strangled sound as he used the magnetite in the rocks to deflect some away from the cage as they fell – others got away from him and bounced and clattered against it – and then hauled the cage and its organic contents up out of the smoking, air-starved cavern and into the dying light of the day.

Logan held Magneto up as he staggered, blood pouring from his nose as he made a clawing motion with his hands, then dragged the airborne cage towards the plane. Stark flew up and seized the top of it, relieving some of the burden, and flew it towards the quinjet; there, with another colossal effort, Magneto wrenched back a doorway in the twisted metal so that as he held the massive cage in position, the wounded could be carried onto the plane – Logan and Rogers both scooping them up as fast as they could while, Stark flew in to help out, and Hawkeye carried two across then shoved a stumbling Summers onto the quinjet, and went back for the last unconscious miner. He hauled him over his shoulder, shaking a little with the exertion.

It was then that Magneto stumbled and abruptly lost control, the cage plummeting back towards the mountain.

Scott cried, “Hawkeye!”

Stark back-flipped midair and flew down towards the cage at eye watering speed, while Hawkeye, even as he plummeted, whipped his bow off his shoulder, and fired a grappling arrow with a wire attached which hooked onto the quinjet doorway, then braced himself and held on tight to the miner over his left shoulder as the wire caught. He jolted horribly, but clung onto the unconscious miner grimly as the cage fell away from him. Stark flew down and grabbed Hawkeye, hauling him back to the plane and all but throwing him inside. As he turned to fly after the falling cage, they all saw that it was too late, the twisted metal crashed down into the hole in the mountain, and there was a roar of smashing rock and belching spumes of smoke as the cavern below erupted into a brief, air-consuming fireball.

Stark flew straight for the fireball, hurtling towards the echoing dust and still settling rock while Scott yelled “Emma!” and threw himself out of the plane. Logan flung himself after him, grabbing him with one arm, pinioning him in hard against his own body as he reached for anything he could get hold off and hit plane. He dug his claws into the metal swinging them both back inside again, then pinned him down hard on the floor and said furiously, “You stupid son of a bitch! Don’t you get it
yet, Cyke? There’s no Warren out there to catch you now. No Bobby there to ice you home. You’re on your goddamned own and you’re gonna die if you don’t look out for yourself – because you’ve driven everyone else who might have saved you the fuck away!”

Heedless of the broken ribs Logan was kneeling on, Scott said desperately, “Logan, I can’t hear her in my head.”

McCoy said, “Scott, take a breath. You can’t hear her in your head because Emma’s damaged telepathy no longer works at this distance and she will, in any case, have almost certainly taken her diamond form before the rocks fell. There’s no reason to believe that she’s dead.”

Scott said brokenly, “Oh God, Emma….?” Logan felt the knife twist on behalf of both of them because Scott wasn’t the only one who couldn’t take another loss when they had already lost so many.

Girón had been helping McCoy with the wounded, but he limped forward to gaze stoically out of the open plane, only the whiteness of his knuckles revealing his inner anguish as his brother’s fate hung in the balance.

Magneto, who looked half dead, and who had blood pouring from his nose and ears had slumped on the seat. Rogers got him a brandy from Stark’s surprisingly useful minibar and handed it to him then helped Logan haul an unresisting Scott up. He sat him down next to Magneto and said slowly and clearly, “Tony is going to find Emma. Scott – promise me you’ll stay in the plane. Scott…?”

Scott nodded dully, but his hands were shaking and McCoy swiftly fetched blankets for him and Magneto, wrapping them around their shoulders. “What that damn bird did to them,” he breathed. “The damn bird that Iron Man dropped on them,” Magneto reminded them with weary defiance.

Scott, his head in his hands, said, “Emma, talk to me. Please talk to me….”

“Sh’ll be okay, Scott,” Logan said roughly. “The White Queen doesn’t get taken out by some goddamned rockfall.”

Stark’s voice came through to them on the communicator. “They’re okay. Emma turned to diamond in time – shielded the boy’s body with hers. The fire burned out – not enough oxygen to sustain it. We’re just finishing splinting his leg…” There was an ominous roaring and crashing and the sound of a furious beast enlarged. Logan grabbed Scott’s shoulder as his head came up in horror, afraid he might throw himself out of the plane again, and Girón firmly planted a hand on his other shoulder. They kept hold of him, fingers curling in his mine-grimy, bloodied, borrowed shirt, until Stark flew up with the unconscious boy in his arms. He handed him over to Rogers, who with Girón’s help carried him to the gurney and laid him on it carefully, and said, “The monster is not in the best of tempers.” As he darted back down then hovered over the hole in the cavern roof, he called back to them, “Oh, and neither is the dragon!”

A moment later he carried a still diamond-formed Emma tenderly into the plane. Scott flung himself at her even as she was changing back, shimmering from ice white to warm flesh, and they clung to each other, like twins reunited after too many years apart. “I thought you were dead,” Scott breathed.

“The times you’ve done that to me you have absolutely no grounds upon which to reproach me,” she told him coolly, although the way her fingers touched his hair so gently was hardly unemotional.

“There’s no school without you,” Scott said. “I don’t even know if there’s a me without you. Probably not a me that counts for anything. Please don’t die on me, Emma.”
“I have no intention of making a dramatic exit. I’m not Jean Grey. And I’ve told you before how unseemly I find your groveling, Scott.” But she kissed his cheek with her eyes closed all the same.

Still holding onto her, he looked over her shoulder at Stark and said a heartfelt, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. In other news – you seem to have a rib sticking through your skin and the fire-monster’s rampaging.”

Emma said, “Ah, yes.” She pressed a finger to her temple and concentrated then staggered back, blood running from her nose. “It doesn’t have what you could call a mind. It has hunger and rage, but there’s nothing I can reach. Whoever made it seems to have forgotten to give it anything except a couple of switches instead of a brain. It wants to make things burn and then it wants to eat their crunchy carbonized corpses. Other than that, there is nobody home.”

Magneto lifted his head wearily and wiped the blood from his nose. “Sorry for dropping a mountain on you, Emma.”

She disentangled herself from Scott’s embrace, gave him a pat on the shoulder, and sat down next to Magneto. “Erik dear, it seems to have escaped your notice, but you just saved thirty-odd lives. A little case of butterfingers at the end there, admittedly, but nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“Scott jumped out of the plane to get to you.”

“Scott is prone to dramatic gestures. It’s an unseemly habit but I’m sure he’ll outgrow it eventually.”

Magneto gave her an exhausted but affectionate glance. “Logan jumped out of the plane after him and clawed them both back to safety.”

She met Logan’s gaze and there was more warmth in it than he’d seen in a long time. “Then I am in his debt. I may not have a romantic use for Scott any more, but he is decorative and he does lend tone to the school.”

Scott looked more reassured by that than anything else she had said. “I also work for food,” he pointed out. “You’d have to pay a replacement instructor minimum wage.”

“A valid point,” Emma said. “Logan, remind me to buy you a bottle of something slightly less gut-rotting than your usual firewater when I hate you a little less.”

“I’ll hold you to that, Frost.”

Romanoff said, “Are we going to do anything about the rampaging carnivorous rock monster heading for the unprotected village? Just as a matter of interest. Normally I’d be all for making the heroic self-sacrificing gesture and ramming it with the plane but as we’re currently an air ambulance for all those civilians, I’m reduced to strafing from a safe distance.”

Scott said wearily, “Eight hundred people versus forty. Still might be a choice we have to make.” To the north the lights of the village were winking on, tiny and vulnerable in the darkness, like fireflies clustering together for warmth.

Rogers said, “Well, today, you won’t be the one making it, I will. You’re in no fit state to do anything. Natasha – commence strafing.”

“How many of those damn things did the Mole Man make?” Hawkeye demanded. “If he was lonely, couldn’t he have just got himself a goldfish like normal people do?”
Romanoff let the creature have it but the effect was not unlike firing a peashooter at a bison. It noticed and resented the attack, but the energy pulses did not even break the skin. As it loomed up out of the hole, roaring its flame-belching fury, Romanoff wheeled the plane around so that Logan could throw himself at it, claws raking, Hawkeye could fire a wire into its scaly glowing shoulder and abseil down to put arrows into its soft tissue areas, while Stark flew around it, blasting it with booming white-light energy pulses that annoyed it considerably and certainly hurt it, particularly when he angled them down its throat, but did not come close to killing it. It had sniffed the air and clearly got a scent of people, because it was already clambering out of the mountain clearly intent on making its way towards the village. Rock gave way beneath its weight and trees ignited from its belching flames and glowing, plated body.

Driving his claws into it over and over again, Logan was uncomfortably aware of feeling like a mosquito on a water buffalo. He was having about as much impact. The beast stank of brimstone, and its skin was uncomfortably hot to the touch, blistering his flesh on impact. It was as if it had fire running in its veins instead of blood. He drove his claws in deep and all that poured out was lava. Its pace didn’t slacken an instant even as Hawkeye risked life and limb firing arrows into its burning red eyes. In his ear he could hear the conversation taking place on the quinjet.

Scott was saying: “If this creature is as hungry as Emma says then we can’t just drive it back underground. It would leave the villagers in too much danger.”

“As a matter of interest do you ever shut up and let someone else run the mission, Summers?” Rogers enquired.

Scott said, “Captain – you’re running out of options, and that beast is threatening eight hundred lives. You need to get Logan and Barton off that thing and let Stark and me run the flying gun routine I used to do with Warren. It’s a shot we have to take before putting this quinjet down its gullet.”

McCoy said, “You’re not up to it.”

“I have to be,” Scott said simply. “I’m potentially the biggest ordnance you have on board.”

“He’s not wrong.” Logan said for Roger’s ears only.

Rogers said into the intercom, “Do it.”

Stark flew in out of the setting sun like a biplane, plucked a still stabbing and still firing Logan and Hawkeye cleanly from the beast’s head, back flipped them all elegantly under a raking swat of its clawed paw – a maneuver that made Logan want to throw up – and flew them back to the plane. He dumped them unceremoniously back in the quinjet, and said, “I’ll take two gigawatts of percussive force for $200, Alex.” He grabbed Scott under the arms and flew off with him, like a gold-plated eagle that had snatched up its prey.

Rogers said tautly to Frost, “Tell me Summers is up to this?”

“Scott Summers is up to anything,” she said coolly, but Logan noticed that her fingers were clenched into fists and Lehnsherr looked a long way from confident.

“You need to aim down its throat,” Rogers ordered over the headset. “It’s the only place it appears to have any vulnerability at all.”

They had evidently hurt the beast enough if, not to slow its relentless pace, at least to make it hate the sight of them, because it came roaring up at Iron Man, vicious claws flailing, and Stark barely kept himself and Summers out its reach. As one claw strafe sent them spinning from its slipstream, turning
head over heels in a sickening tail dive, Logan said tersely, “Puking on it probably isn’t gonna slow
it down much, Stark.”

“Wolverine, do me a favor and go fuck yourself with a saguaro cactus plant, will you, just for me?”
Stark told him crisply, straightening up, still holding Scott firmly, and jetted up with dizzying speed.
The monster flailed too late and Stark pointed Scott down its roaring gullet.

Rogers said, “Now, Summers!”

The world turned red.

Logan rocked back on his heels because although he had seen Scott do it before against that sentinel
at the school, this was even more devastating. One minute there was a roaring raging rock monster
and then next there was an enormous crater in the mountain and the lower half of a headless torso
collapsing slowly back into the burning mine. It teetered for a moment and then just plunged neatly
into the hole from which it had emerged. The rest of the mountain fell down on top of it with an
enormous crashing thunder of rocks. As the last of the sun slipped down behind the horizon line, the
echoes bounced off the other mountains and then faded into a sullen, smoky silence.

Hawkeye said, “Fuck!”

Rogers said, “Good shot, Summers.” There was no reply.

Logan peered anxiously out of the plane and saw that Iron Man looked fine but Scot appeared to
have passed out in his grip.

“Shooting your load and then falling asleep like that…? You’re letting down a whole gender here,
Summers,” Stark murmured quite audibly over the intercom as he flew back to the jet.

“It is disappointing when that happens,” Romanoff admitted. “But I suppose, looking like that, he’d
have to have at least one flaw.”

“Natasha, darling, do be reasonable,” Frost purred. “Even the Koh-I-Noor has one flaw.”

Seeing to the injured miners had taken up most of the flight to Tegucigalpa. Girón and the other
walking wounded had helped immensely, ignoring their own injuries to monitor their fellow miners'
injuries and administer water and basic triage.

With them all working together, they had managed to make everyone comfortable, even Luis Girón
and his shattered thigh – McCoy and Stark had done rapid blood-typing to get a nanotech match so
they could start the work of rebuilding his broken bones, while keeping him sedated, while Frost and
Barton had monitored the head trauma victims to check for any non-reactive pupils, confusion, or
distress.

“Because I don’t want to encourage your interest in trepanning, Clint,” McCoy said, “but if any of
those symptoms kick in then we may well have to drill a hole in someone’s head to relieve the
pressure.”

There had been perfect amity between the two sides as they worked together, a situation only marred
by the small matter of both Frost and Magneto refusing to allow McCoy to run any tests on them to
check what overuse of their malfunctioning powers had done to their general health, and Scott,
coming around from his manly swoon, had been equally stubborn about allowing McCoy to sedate
him before applying the nanocyte technology that McCoy insisted had now gone from an optional
extra to an absolute necessity, given the exacerbation of damage to his ribcage. That was when it had been made all too apparent to the Avengers that Frost and Magneto considered giving them access to their physiognomy the equivalent of handing defense information to an enemy in a time of war, and that Scott did not trust them enough to choose to be unconscious in their company if he could avoid it.

They were perfectly polite about it, but they were also quietly adamant. Logan wasn’t surprised. Frost and Magneto had never signed up for more than an armed truce on Scott’s behalf, and he could see that, from Scott’s perspective, the last occasion but one when he’d been defenselessly unconscious in their custody, they had taken the opportunity to strip him naked, dress him in jail jimmies, and put him in manacles before incarcerating him in a prison where he had been mistreated and almost murdered. McCoy was more upset than he wanted to let on, but Logan could smell it on him, and Rogers was silently but quite sincerely hurt.

“Can you at least tell me what the medical facilities are like at your mysterious school?” McCoy demanded. “Because, as I am quite sure you are aware, all three of you currently need to be under the care of a licensed practitioner, preferably one versed in phoenix force physics.”

Magneto said, “We have a healer.”

“But he can’t fix your powers or you would have had him do that already. So, can he fix damage resulting from use of your powers?” They stonewalled him unblinkingly and McCoy unwillingly gave up trying to outstare two sphinxes and turned back to Scott.

“Please see sense.”

“I’m sorry, Henry. I am withholding my consent. I don’t want to be sedated.”

Stark said, “I had no idea you were a Ramones fan, Summers.” Which, naturally enough, won him a blank look from Scott, who barely knew who the Beatles were, having spent most of his formative years in the Danger Room being a no-life loser.

Henry murmured, “‘And some fell on stony ground.’” He began to apply the nanocytes to Scott’s ribs, by no means in the best of tempers. “This is going to hurt – quite unnecessarily, I might add.”

Scott said, “It’s fine, Henry. Thank you for the medical care.”

“You’re not at all welcome.” McCoy’s pettish tone was in no way matched by the gentleness with which he finished bandaging the nanocyte-infused pad in place over Scott’s broken ribs so it could go on doing its bone-knitting work and then treated his cut palms, abdomen, and knees.

Hawkeye had already snapped a picture of Scott on his phone in his ragged clothing and various injuries and now said, “I’m going to post this online and explain that this is how you end up looking if you have sex doggy-style on a beach that has razor shells on it. You can be a precautionary lesson to perverts.”

“He’s more likely to elevate having sex on razor shells into a fashionable kink,” Romanoff observed. Hawkeye looked back at the picture on his phone and grimaced. “You may have a point, Tasha. I’ll just keep it for blackmail purposes.”

They had flown into Tegucigalpa like conquering heroes – the people from the village they had saved from the giant fiery rock monster having iPhoned their exploits ahead of them, and Logan experienced once again that twist of wry amusement at how differently one was treated as an Avenger as opposed to an X-Man. He’d got so used to it, he hardly noticed being called mutant slurs
one day and hailed as a hero the next, so Rogers completely took him by surprise at the press conference outside the hospital, with the cameras whirring and the questions raining on them, when he nodded in the most friendly fashion to Magneto, put one arm around Emma Frost’s shoulders and one – carefully – around Scott’s waist – which also helped hold a nanocyte-tortured Scott up – and announced that the real heroes of the day were the X-Men.

While Rogers, looking tall and broad-shouldered and handsome, beside a brittly pale Frost, a headache-harried Magneto, and a slightly swaying Scott, explained that it had been Magneto, Frost, and Scott’s mutant powers that had defeated the monster, McCoy murmured to Logan, “How’s Ororo going to take those three still being described as ‘X-Men’?”

“Probably depends on how good a foot massage I give her first,” Logan admitted.

“Better throw in a back rub, too,” McCoy advised. “Of course, if this is making the North American news and gets there ahead of us, you’re already screwed.”

“I am never admitting it to Cyke, but, some of that stuff Emma taught him to do is new to me, so…I might give that a try, see if that turns Ro up sweet.”

“I confess I had already decided to give Abigail a demonstration of some of those little tricks myself. It must be said, the woman has her faults but Emma Frost really is an excellent teacher.”

Much as he had done on Utopia, after being beaten half to death by Osborn and barely able to stand unaided, Scott, when the cameras were turned on him, pulled it together and made a quiet but clearly heartfelt speech in which he explained that it had been a tripartite effort: “We, the X-Men, are always proud to do our part to save any humans or mutants who have need of our assistance. It’s what we’ve always done. It’s what Charles Xavier trained us all to do. But, make no mistake, without the Avengers all those men would have died today, and the fact they were even in that cavern in a position where it was possible for the Avengers and the X-Men to extract them is down to the efforts of the miners themselves, who made truly superhuman efforts to get all of the survivors a safe distance from the initial explosion and then kept each other alive until rescue arrived, all under the leadership of Amado Girón.” He nodded to the man, who had stayed to answer any questions the reporter might have. “So, if you, the good people of Honduras, really want heroes to interview for your news channels, you have a homegrown one right here.”

McCoy murmured into the intercom: “Steve, I’d estimate you’ve got about thirty seconds before Scott throws up or passes out on camera, and Erik’s not going to be far behind him. Maybe wrap it up?”

They made it back to the quinjet just in time for Scott to throw up into bowl McCoy proffered for him with the skill of long acquaintance, and exactly thirty-seven seconds before Magneto blacked out.

As the plane took off, Stark tossed McCoy a bottle of water for Scott and helped Emma to bring Magneto round, saying, “You know, it makes us look bad when the Avengers and the X-Men work together and you guys end up spewing and fainting, so, try to cut back on that, will you?”

“I’ll do my best.” Scott slumped back on the seat, accepted the water bottle with gratitude, waved away the bowl he had puked in with a grimace, and endured McCoy putting a cold flannel on his forehead and taking his pulse with stoic resignation.

“I’m not going to say ‘I told you so’, but if you’d let me sedate you, you would be feeling a lot better right now.”
“We did good work together today.” Scott put down his water and looked around at the rest of them hopefully. “And us having worked together – does that mean everyone’s willing to let the whole unintentional mind-assault-by-telepathy thing go now…?”

Hawkeye laughed hollowly. “You wish, Summers.”

“Uh – no.” Stark refilled his glass. “In fact that reminds me – those of us who got to spend three and a half hours in the sex-torture dungeon that Summers calls a subconscious…”

“I don’t think that’s strictly fair, Stark,” Scott muttered.

“You went to hell, Cyclops. Moreover you went to a hell where bad guys with animal parts kept trying to rape you – and you had fun. You have no comeback. So, sane people on the plane, we now know how much Summers, here, likes people to do their homework, so, here’s my What I Learned On My Vacation In The Mind Of Mr. Over Easy assignment – and that is, that, in the days when the British Navy ran on rum, sodomy, and the lash, Summers is the only person on this plane who would have liked the rum part least. Hawkeye – your turn.”

Logan sat next to Scott, as Hawkeye aired a long list of his Scott-centered grievances in considerable detail, to say, “Stark has a point, you know, your masochism is getting out of control. And another thing – that wasn’t proper guy sex that you had so don’t think it was.”

“What? Why wasn’t it?”

He tried not to notice how pretty Scott’s mouth was when he pouted. “Because guy sex is…manlier than that. Not all that kissy-kissy, touchy-feely mushy crap. Back me up on this, Stark.”

Stark nodded. “Oh absolutely. Real manly man sex, as everyone knows, has to take place in a cave, as close to fully-clothed as possible, without kissing, with minimal conversation – a grunt to establish consent is acceptable but any more than that and you’re basically a girl – no touching beyond what’s absolutely necessity, and obviously the only acceptable lubricant would be saliva and not too much of it…oh no, wait, that definition of ‘manly’ went out of fashion when prosimians were the hip new thing. Then evolution happened. Logan, here, apparently missed it.”

Logan glowered at him. “You’re a jerk, Stark.”

“And you’re over-compensating. Okay, anyone on this plane – I bet you a thousand bucks that this Tarzan act is just a cover up because Logan cries after sex.”

“No takers,” Romanoff said, switching to autopilot and stretching luxuriously, while Hawkeye snorted his agreement. Rogers wearily told everyone to lay off Summers; that it was what Captain Britain would undoubtedly designate ‘bad form’ to take advantage of information acquired through enemy torture to harangue a fellow hero and why they needed to drop the subject. Also to stop calling him ‘Whoreclops’, because that was just mean.

Scott said a heartfelt, “Thank you, Captain.”

Hawkeye said, “What about ‘Slutclops’? It alliterates so nicely. Slutclops Summers, Bike of the Multiverse. Read about his exciting adventures across the dimensions – on his back – every month. A dollar and ninety-nine cents from all good retailers.”

Logan’s claws came out and somehow that angry snarl at Hawkeye could not quite be swallowed down.

Stark said, “Fine, if you think his ickle feelings might get hurt by us all jeering and pointing at him,
but as soon as he’s out of earshot, it’s a free-for-all, right? Because no way am I not telling everyone I’ve ever met about what the inside of his head is like. Seriously, I could dine out on his sex-life for years.”

As Rogers endeavored to explain the concepts of ‘decency’ and ‘fair play’ to Stark, with frequent references to baseball, while Hawkeye countered with all the reasons why those rules shouldn’t apply in this case – which mostly seemed to be on the grounds that Scott was annoying – Logan took Scott by the elbow and led him over to the quieter part of the plane. He had no idea if it was some residual runoff from being around Howlett, the headache, or just sheer exhaustion, but Scott let Logan push him quite gently into a padded corner with graceful submission, and then wrapped his arm comfortably around his nanocyte-rebonding ribs.

They sat there in silence for a while as they flew over what Frost called flyover country, states flashing by beneath them at trisonic speed, and then they drew closer to what Logan, despite being a Canadian, now thought of as home. Magneto was looking stronger and almost as unreadable as ever, and Frost and Romanoff were fine-tuning the plans for their girls’ night out. Scott was breathing easier by then, the nanocytes having finished putting him back together, and the ointment McCoy had applied to his cuts having turned them into a far less angry series of pale lines. McCoy came over a few times to check on his progress and grunt that he did in fact appear to be healing just as well as usual, but he would still love to run some tests on what possession by the Phoenix Force had done to his mutation because he was quite sure he had achieved more than two gigawatts with that last burst.

“Jarvis is collecting the data,” Stark assured him. “He was monitoring it the whole time. And I’m sure we’ll all sleep easier in our beds knowing that the man who deliberately chose to get it on with the White Queen, the Black Queen, and the Goblin Queen now has even more unstable power surging through his eye sockets than ever before.”

Hawkeye said, “Yeah, Summers, just as a matter of interest, have you ever even been with a woman who didn’t smack you around…?”

Logan said, “Ignore those assholes.”

Scott said, “I am.”

It was a little awkward, after the drama, not to mention the way they’d nearly had angry hate… something before the explosion, to sit here quietly, unsure of what to say. Romanoff had given Summers a drink, Logan noticed, which could possibly be the water he’d asked for or could be neat vodka so his head would hurt worse, with her you could never tell. But they were getting closer to New York now. If they were going to have a conversation it was now or never.

Scott said, “So…Avengers, eh…?”

“Yep.”

“Are they always like this?”

“Pretty much.”

“From a distance, you know, when you’re saving the world with them they seem…”

“Shinier?” Logan suggested.

“I was going with ‘less dysfunctional’.”

“You should see how much worse that gets when Thor and The Hulk are here too.”
“Is it me or does Barton have a lot of sexual hang-ups? And does Stark always have that short an attention span?”

“Yes and…yes.” Logan held out the pendant. “You’d better have your necklace back. Wouldn’t like Howlett to think you weren’t wearing his jewelry.”

“You’re a smart guy, Logan. You know what it is.”

It occurred to Logan that nobody else thought he was smart. Scott probably didn’t always get that half the things Logan knew about people he knew because of their scent, how they smelled scared or angry or deceitful. (Deceit smelled like meat on the turn; a flowering of rot just starting to sweeten on the bone.) Scott probably thought Logan was just more perceptive than he was about what made people tick, because Logan had lived all those lifetimes compared with Scott’s little more than a quarter of a century. Scott had to work hard at understanding nuances of human behavior in a way he didn’t with battle tactics and fractals, so he was probably the only person on the planet who would find it conceivable that Logan had some deeper insight into the human psyche than he did.

Not taking the amulet, Scott said softly, “Logan…?”

Logan placed the chain over Scott’s head, like he was giving him a medal instead of an escape route. “It’s a magical transdimensional panic button, I know. Have it back.”

Scott thrust up a hand and held the amulet from touching his skin and for a moment the chain rippled there. “You didn’t seem too happy about the last prison I broke out of. Any particular reason why you’re giving me back my skeleton key?”

“If you knew a little more about anger management issues, Slim, and a lot less about repression, you’d understand that wanting to kill someone isn’t the same as wanting someone to be dead. You can want to kill someone because in that moment you just want to make them stop. It doesn’t mean you ever wanted them not to be alive a second later. I don’t know if that memory’s in there and you’ve just repressed it so well that even you can’t find it, but if that’s what happened with Xavier, that you just…lost your perfect control and lashed out when you were panicked and angry and hyped up on phoenix power, and by the time you realized what you’d done he was already dead, then you’re gonna have to live with it, and it’s never not gonna hurt, but it will get better. It won’t always feel like this. Sometimes you just have to wait out the pain.”

Scott kept holding off the amulet and Logan reached out abruptly and yanked his wrist down, letting the pendant close the magical circuit as it swung against Scott’s bare skin.

“Howlett gave you that because he thought you might need it. I think it was a good idea.”

“I accept being hated by strangers, Logan, but it’s a lot harder to live with being hated by people you know.”

“Scott, the person on the planet who hates you the most is the one who’s living in your skin. You’re the one who has to cut you some slack, and you’ve never been much good at that, have you? Maybe you need to try and like yourself a little.”

“I don’t think I remember how.”

“Look, I can’t tell you I’m not mad at you or that I don’t blame you. I am and I do. And, if you’re honest, you’re mad as hell with me. You’re bitter and angry and you feel betrayed and misunderstood and the victim of a horrible injustice of which I’m the ringleader. You just keep pretending that you’re coping when you’re not. We’ve always hurt each other and we’ve always
come back from it and this time we haven’t…yet. Doesn’t mean we never will.”

“Unlike you, I don’t have eternity at my disposal, Logan.”

“Cheap shot coming from the one of us who ran off and had sex with someone who looked just like me.”

“What has that to do with…?”

Logan rolled his eyes. “Christ, Scott, you’re so fucking passive aggressive you even fly under your own radar. Just accept that when you did that you were doing it to hurt me.”

“I wasn’t!”

“Just accept that it worked.”

And he wished he could see his eyes then because Scott’s face was intent and focused and… surprised.

Logan kept talking steadily, “I know you, Slim. You think I’m a hypocritical bastard who expects you to live by better rules than I do – and it’s true, I do, because you were better than me, and you’re better than this, so, yeah, damn right I set the bar higher for you than I set it for me. When we first met, I was already a killer, but you really were a Boy Scout. I’m entitled to use a different measuring scale for our sins. And you need to stop trying to be what you think the world needs you to be and get back to being what you really are.”

“Emma says that’s just yours and Henry’s emotional crutch – needing me to be someone I’m not any more.”

Logan didn’t blink. “So, tell me, Slim. Did it feel right? Every time you had to make a decision that used someone else’s life like it was a pawn in a chess game? Every time you had to make another moral compromise? Cut another corner? Did it feel like a piece of machinery slipping into its rightful place or did it grate and creak and hurt you worse every time?”

“Just because something’s easy, doesn’t make it right.”

“Just because something’s hard doesn’t mean it isn’t wrong. I’ve got no illusions about what I am, doesn’t stop me wanting to be better than that. But you, you’ve convinced yourself you’re something you’re not, and I think you need to find out who you really are again, without Jean or Emma in your head telling you, or Xavier pushing you or protecting you, or Sinister mind-fucking you. Without anyone manipulating you for your own good or theirs. Just who the hell are you now you’re not the King of Utopia or the leader of the X-Men or Jean Grey’s husband or Emma Frost’s boyfriend or the boy Charles Xavier rescued from Jack Winters then sent out to fight Magneto?”

“And what about you, Logan? Do you know who you are?”

Logan rose to his feet. “No. But I know something I didn’t know yesterday.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m not the guy who wants to murder you. You wanna get that job done, you’re going to have to find yourself another killer.” As a flicker of something unreadable washed over Scott’s visored face, Logan said, “And if you’re lying awake some nights thinking you half-like the idea of me impaling you, maybe you need to go and brush up on your Freud, Slim, because that might not be your death wish talking.”
Summers said, “Emma says you’re the one who needs to stock up at the Buy A Clue store.”

“Frost’s just jealous of my rugged good looks and witty sophistication.”

Scott said, “There’s nothing wrong with the way you look, Logan. I like the way you look.” And it was childish, the way Slim said it; affronted because Logan was dissing his ex-friend; and childish that Logan liked to hear him say it, like they were both nine and confused by why it made them happy to sit on the swing seat but about to carve their initials on the old oak tree all the same. Scott didn’t really see people how other people did, anyway, and not just because he only saw them in red. All those times he’d shaved in front of a mirror and he still didn’t know he was handsome, like he didn’t know Logan was ugly. He didn’t see people that way. Sometimes he just straight up didn’t see people at all, even when they were standing right in front of him.

And Logan might even have said something foolish but he noticed simultaneously that Romanoff had got back in the pilot seat to bring them down and that the blue light was glowing in the center of that silver amulet. Something settled in his gut that felt a lot like misery. “Lover boy’s calling,” he said, and his voice sounded the way old coffee grounds tasted: bitter and dark.

When Scott said, “Howlett…?” and looked down in shock, then saw the light, he smiled. It was a pretty smile, shy and young and way too much like a kid being granted an unexpected treat. It made Logan want to punch a wall until the stone crumbled and his knuckles were bloody, until he could see the metal glinting through the shattered skin.

Logan wondered if Scott thought Logan was a rib-cracking lover, if his weight would be crushing whereas Howlett’s had been carefully managed so as not to hurt him; if he imagined that Logan would be rough with him, and careless, then just roll over and start snoring when they were done, not kiss him and hold him, and stroke the sweaty strands of his hair out of his eyes the way Howlett had done. It was nothing but painful to realize that Scott would rather have half of Howlett – less than half as the guy had given pretty much all his heart to Hercules as a lover and Kurt as a father with only a few table-leavings left for Scott – than all of Logan. And not much consolation to also realize that, as far as Scott knew, Logan wasn’t offering; he wasn’t even offering as far as Logan knew. Wherever they were, they weren’t there yet. Which wouldn’t have been so bad, if only Howlett hadn’t so emphatically got there first.

The Avengers – or at least the parts of it comprised of McCoy, Stark, and Barton – were openly agog to see Hercules and Howlett in the flesh again, after getting so up and close with them in their heads. So, they spilled out of the quinjet and down to the grounds of the mansion with less than perfect cool. Rogers, of course, was being handsomely stoic, and Romanoff had opted for inscrutable, so had Frost, although he noticed she’d brought her latest gin and tonic with her. Magneto looked mildly curious.

Making it something of a disappointment when the portal disgorged two teenagers, one blue-furred and tearful, and absolutely no brawny loincloth-wearing heroes.

“So!” Kurt hurled himself at him. “My plan went wrong!”

Scott put an arm around him as the boy buried his head in his chest. “Where are Howlett and Hercules?”

“Circe’s got them,” Kurt’s voice was muffled through sobs but perfectly clear. “I told them the spell shield wasn’t working properly yet, but they wouldn’t wait.”
“Why am I not surprised? Are they alive?”

The girl looked pale but composed and was a dead ringer for Kitty, apart from the eyeliner, armlets, and mode of dress. She opened the Spider-man lunchbox that Scott had bought Young Kurt on his arrival from their dimension and revealed a neat technology light show that made Stark and McCoy crane their necks curiously.

“Yes, but she used a metamorphosis spell on them. Kurt can teleport us into where she’s keeping them, and we’ve got the thaumaturgic wave energy shield working perfectly now and we’ve managed to reduce the size to make it portable, so we’re protected from more magic, but we can’t undo the spell she used to transform them and we don’t know how to make her.” She cast an appraising look over Scott that was very much a field general checking the suitability of troops for the coming engagement, and gave a satisfied nod. “But you’ll be perfect for that. Circe’s very susceptible.”

McCoy and Stark exchanged a glance of mutual excitement. “I’ve always wondered if it was possible to design a thaumaturgic wave energy shield device,” McCoy breathed.

Stark was also eyeing the winking lights and plastic tubes with great interest. “My calculations suggested one could only be successfully constructed in a dimension where raw magic was plentiful and stable. Is that a Spider-Man pencil sharpener they’re using to make the secondary connection…?”

Kurt wiped his eyes and gazed up at Scott. “Did you work on the crying prettily thing?”

“I haven’t had a chance,” Scott protested. “I have to wear my visor in this dimension.”

“Circe’s not really susceptible to crying anyway,” Other Kitty said, still assessing Scott dispassionately. “But she is to other…inducements.”

Scott said warily, “What inducements, Aikaterine?”

“Don’t worry. You’ll do fine.” The girl proffered a pair of sandals with a dazzling smile. “I brought your shoes.”

Kurt, a lot less tearful now they had brought in reinforcements, held up the smallest paper bag Logan had ever seen in his life. “And I brought your clothes.”

Scott said, “I’ll need to see any schematics you have for her magical island and everything you have on her defense systems.”

“It’s all back at the palace.”

“Then let’s go.” He turned to Frost and Magneto. “You don’t mind…?”

Magneto merely shrugged while Frost waved an elegant hand. “Go save people heroically, darling. It’s what you do.”

Scott hung on his heel to say to Rogers, “Did you urgently need to arrest me right this minute…?”

Rogers said, still inscrutably, “It can wait.”

McCoy and Stark were both looking hopeful and would clearly have liked to be invited to tag along, and Logan’s legs had propelled him forward again, without in any way asking his consent. “You need any help?”
Scott’s face got that young, touched look again, the one that got right under Logan’s ribs like a dagger blade, and he definitely looked as if he was about to say ‘yes’, when the teenage girl, who had been assessing Logan narrowly, said, “Circe didn’t really take to Howlett. Probably better not to expose her to another one of them when we need to keep her sweet.”

That definitely looked like disappointment. Sighing, Scott said, “Next mission, maybe, Logan?”

Logan found himself saying gruffly, “It’s a date.”

“Wait!” Stark said imperiously. As Summers halted, Stark looked around at the others. “Has everyone finished slut-shaming Summers or does anyone have a crack he or she still needs to make? No? Off you go then, Cyclops. Enjoy your…impossibly dangerous mission most likely to result in blindness, madness, or painful death. Probably too late to suggest you get a hobby, a pet, or indeed a life, I imagine? Okay then….”

As Scott, with his arm around Kurt, and Aikaterine, carrying the lunchbox, vanished through the portal, Stark came back to Logan, shaking his head. “You’re going to fix the younger model, right? Make sure he doesn’t think capture and torture is just that thing that happens in between mealtimes?”

“Buy the damned kid a puppy,” Hawkeye told him. “Teach him how to play softball, and don’t let him have sex with anyone. Ever.”

“Slim already knows how to play softball. Having pets is irresponsible when you may have to go away on missions, and Gambit’s in charge of sex-ed, not me.”

“Gambit?” Hawkeye stared at him in disbelief. “So how does that go? ‘This is how you say ‘mais, oui’ in ten different languages to anything anyone wants to do to you, however depraved?’”

Stark nodded. “Yeah, come off it, Logan. Remy LeBeau’s idea of ‘safe sex’ is padded handcuffs. No wonder Summers puts out for guys he’s just met.”

“Adult Cyke didn’t go to my school. I am not responsible for him whoring it out across the multiverse. That is not on me.”

Tersely, Frost said, “Scott Summers is not a whore.”

“Only because he’s too dumb to charge and keeps giving it up for free.”

Frost said, “At least he doesn’t cry after sex like some people.”

“Only because of his freakishly high pain threshold,” Hawkeye muttered.

“I do not cry after sex!” Logan snapped.

Stark said to Hawkeye, “We should really try to work out which of the male X-Men is the subbiest sub who ever subbed to a woman in stilettos, because I think it’s a free-for-all.”

“Definitely quicker to try to work out which one of them doesn’t sob over beautiful sunsets. Colossus probably paints them while weeping, post-coitally, and chucking back the vodka. With Beast we’re talking about Brand, so there’s no way she’s not gonna make him cry like a little girl. Wolverine’s gonna be clinging and weeping through his post-sex cigar smoke, just because. Drake’s bound to be a sniveler. Meanwhile, Cyclops will be mentally composing sad little odes about not being able to see the damn sunset because everything’s always red as he uses up two more tubes of Neosporin on the latest fingernail scratches and handcuff-welts….”
“How about you all go fuck yourselves then throw yourselves off the top of the Avengers building?” Logan suggested warmly. He turned to Rogers. “This is the point where we let Magneto and Frost call for their Magiktaxi, right?”

Rogers could do a good thousand yard stare but Logan had lived longer so neither one of them blinked first. At length, Rogers said coolly, “They’re still wanted felons, but, given the current infiltration of S.H.I.E.L.D. by agent or agents unknown, I wouldn’t be able to guarantee their safety in our custody, so, I am regretfully having to let them go free.”

Logan said, “Good answer.” He beckoned to Frost and told her that if she wanted to call up the Queen of Limbo it was okay with them.

Frost said, “You couldn’t stop us anyway.”

“True, but it can get messy when we try.”

There was a pause before she said, “Was there something you wanted to say to me, Logan?”

He drew her out of earshot of everyone else and then said, “Handy – that lava monster not having a consciousness. I mean, it would have been a nightmare to try to reason with a mind that alien, and chances are, even if there had been a sentient creature there, we would still have had to put it down. Made it a lot easier for Cap to pull the trigger you telling him there was nobody home. Cyke too.”

The glance she shot at him was swift and searching. “Sometimes those of us with more flexible ethics have to simplify matters for the soul-searching people who might otherwise have to make choices that would cause them pain.”

“You know I get what shouldering that means. But people like us – other people don’t always appreciate the gifts we give them.”

Frost shrugged elegantly. “A severed horse’s head on the pillow does so often offend.”

“I’m just saying, I know what you did and as no one else would thank you for it, I’m doing it.”

Another glance from her blue eyes and there was a flash of the old vulnerability and warmth in them. She said quietly, “Thank you, Logan.”

He said, “One day – we’ll be past all this. World might even be a better place by then.”

“Perhaps.” She finished the contents of her glass and handed it back to him. “But, you know, I won’t hold my breath.”

It was a weird debriefing. They sat around a conference table that seemed far too big for the four of them – McCoy had already dived back into his lab, while Romanoff was primping for her date with Frost and only giving them half her attention as she walked in wearing more and more outrageously overpriced frocks while Stark gave her fashion advice on how best to accessorize each dress that she very sensibly ignored. Logan wished he didn’t have the kind of mind that wondered if the purse she ended up opting for had been chosen for the label or because it was large enough to conceal a vibrator. That question was gonna drive him nuts all night now. No one was actually going to admit they were missing the renegade X-Men or that it had been both maddening and exciting to work with them today. They were too tired even for takeout. It was late, and they all had cuts, bruises, and muscle strains, which - Hawkeye was pointing out to anyone who would listen - had inevitably been completely overlooked in McCoy’s obsession with delivering back to Emma Frost a Scott Summers
who was more or less unmarked.

“So, if I got myself an incredibly scary girl friend, would I start getting that level of medical care, too...?”

Logan said glumly, “I hate the way he says ‘Howlett’.”

Rogers was a patient man and he was being patient now, and not just because he was deeply troubled about Summers, but because he, alone of anyone else in the damned room, had some sympathy for Logan. “How do you think he says it?”

“Like it’s the answer to all the questions in the world.”

“He just says it like it’s the man’s name, Logan.”

“You’re not listening then.”

Stark leaned across the table to say helpfully: “No, you’re obsessed, jealous, and paranoid – which is not a good look on you, incidentally.”

Hawkeye said, “I don’t get what the fuss is about. It’s not like Summers is hard to pull. Hell, most of the people he’s slept with don’t seem to ask him first. They just show up with sex toys.”

“And lingerie,” Stark reminded him.

“What?”

“You didn’t enjoy the lingerie? Do you know how much some of that stuff Frost was barely wearing costs? I couldn’t help noticing it was pearls before swine when it came to Summers, too.” He walked up and down gesticulating with his glass, warming to his subject. “Frost really deserves a more appreciative bedmate. That woman with that body and that imagination between the sheets and she gets...boring is the new black Summers. She could have shown up in flannel pajamas, suggesting they did a nice crossword and Cyclops would probably have been fine with it. Did you also notice there wasn’t a move he made that she didn’t have to suggest to him? He may be hot shit on a mission, but the guy’s got no initiative in the bedroom. None.”

“Slim likes the intimacy and trust part of sex,” Logan grunted. “He’s weird like that.”

Stark shrugged. “Well, it’s the female X-Men I feel sorry for. They want to crack whips and swing from the light fittings and you boys just want a quiet night in with a mug of Horlicks.”

Logan blinked. “Whore licks?”

“It’s a wholesome bedtime drink involving malted milk. Captain Britain swears by it.”

“Wholesome? With a name like that? Doesn’t seem very likely. I think Braddock was pulling your metal leg there.”

“My point is that Emma Frost has spent way too long slumming it dating Boy Scout Summers.”

Romanoff, already halfway out the door, hung on her elegant heel to say, “Scott Summers, the ridiculously handsome twenty-seven year-old guy at the peak of physical fitness, with the perfect physique, impressive flexibility, ass you can bounce a quarter off, and ability to obey orders to the letter? That guy? He does what he’s told in the bedroom, Stark. Exactly what he’s told, without whimpering, crying, saying that his mommy wouldn’t want him doing that, or that he’s heard it can
cause chafing. If that Sinister weirdo really does have a zoo with clone Cyclopes in it, I want to free one for my personal use.”

As she walked off, Stark shouted after her, “That is not what women want in the bedroom! They want suave sophistication and witty quips! They want to be intoxicated by the heady personal musk of ambition, power, brilliance, and...billionaireism.”

“Not a real word,” Rogers murmured but quietly so Stark could keep going in full spate, which he did.

“They want a guy who’ll show initiative and take command. Who’ll respect them as an equal and yet make them feel desirable and mysterious and...why are you shaking your head like that, Romanoff?”

“Because in my experience women would far rather have a hard-abbed, taut-assed pretty boy who can do back flips. Especially one who knows how to shut up and do what he’s told – particularly with his tongue – and you are not that guy, Stark. Night all. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“I can do back flips in the suit!” Stark shouted after her, but with a last wave of the hand, she was gone. Stark slammed his fist on the table. “Women are not that shallow.”

Logan patted him on the shoulder with genuine sympathy. “You keep telling yourself that, Bub.”

Rogers said with a sigh, “Can we please talk about something that isn’t sex?”

Hawkeye said, “Like what?”

Rogers said, “I need to talk to Logan.”

Hawkeye said to Stark, “Wanna go get drunk and look at strippers?”

“It just sounds so cheap when we do it.”

They left all the same.

Logan cocked an enquiring glance at Rogers, “Might as well spill it all, Cap. Ain’t gonna get any better for festering.”

“I need to stretch my legs.”

They traveled down in the elevator together and made their way to Central Park. It was a star-pocked night, crisp and clear, and Logan thought about that little village in Honduras, the name of which he’d never even learned, that still had people in it, looking up at stars like these, because they had happened to be passing. A lot of times the patterns the world came in were ugly and inexplicable, but today they had been almost black and white and, briefly, gloriously red, and they had been beautiful.

As they walked under night-breeze rustled trees, the moonlight finding Rogers’ fair hair, he said, “Do you think Summers was as willing to get us framed for his murder as those L.I.M.B.O. bigots? He knew, if he was killed, that I wouldn’t cover it up. And, given how popular he is with students and young people, I could see there being riots if we had to admit that he’d died in our custody. The world and their iPad saw the Avengers taking him off the streets. He obviously has a death wish and all he seems to think about is how to make the world a better place for mutants. Was he trying to set us up as his murderers?”

“Subconsciously?” Logan shrugged. “Maybe. You’ve been inside his head, now, it’s like one of those three-dimensional chess sets, there’s always a move being planned while another one is made.
For all I know, he can process pro-mutant plans in his sleep, but I don’t think he was consciously looking at an end-game more than he just wanted to…stop. He’s been tired for a long time. Maybe he just wanted a rest.”

“Death isn’t a rest. It’s an end.”

“And Summers is an emotional wreck with first-rate powers of repression, Rogers. He’s been functioning since killing Charles because he makes himself function, and because he doesn’t think he’s earned the right to take a break, but if someone just came along and…”

“Broke him?”

“You said it.”

“I’m really not happy about a situation where we have a perceived people’s revolutionary running around with a death wish that no one else knows about.”

They passed by water, silver and black with the reflection of watchful trees. Logan said, “You think he’s safer in custody or out of it? We could always try Stark and Barton’s plan and force him to go chill on a tropical paradise island. Just put it under a Reed Richards-made dome so the rest of his squad can’t break him out. No one could call that cruel and unusual punishment and it’s not like the guy isn’t overdue for a vacation.” He wasn’t actually entirely opposed to that idea. He wasn’t, if he was completely honest, entirely opposed to the idea of keeping Scott locked up in his basement either. Right now, he felt like he really needed Scott to be safe more than he needed him to be free.

“I’m serious, Logan.”

“What can I tell you? I don’t think he’d deliberately screw us over to set us up to look like murderers. He made me some apologies and they felt…look, they weren’t true, but they were heartfelt.”

“Was he lying or wasn’t he?”

“He thought he was gonna die and he didn’t want me to feel bad about it. So, he doesn’t think he killed Xavier, he thinks the phoenix did, and, as Stark dropped the phoenix on him, he thinks we’re as responsible as he is, but he wanted to give me some closure. He doesn’t think the Avengers are ever gonna be there for mutants and he thinks my school is a pipe dream and we’re all gonna get squashed like bugs by Sentinels unless he can find a way to save us, but he didn’t mention it this time around because hey, dreams are important. He told me everything he thought I wanted to hear because just for an hour there he was too fucking tired to keep fighting and Howlett broke him.”

“No – Howlett was kind to him.”

“Yeah – that’s what broke him. Scott Summers is a desert cactus, he’s used to short rations, you give him too much water these days, and all you do is kill him. Howlett was way too nice to him. Cyke can’t deal with that right now. He could have stayed there and been happy but he doesn’t deserve happy and besides, he didn’t feel like a mutant there, so he came back, but he came back broken, and that’s Howlett’s fault.”

“And what does that mean from the perspective of him martyring himself for the mutant cause?”

“I ain’t too sure, but the fact is that he could have died in prison three times and you and I would have been on the hook for it every time, and the guy does have a grass roots following.”

“Three times? I thought it was twice.”
“You’re forgetting me nearly stabbing him through the heart when I lost my temper with him.”

“Given that you’re an Avenger, I was trying to, yes.”

They walked around the edge of the water and Logan smelled teenagers making out not that far away, heard the tinkle of the last drop of booze in a bottle someone had left under a seat that was rolling with each gust of night breeze. The teenagers smelled urgent and wary at once, clinging tight to each other like they were afraid the world was going to separate them if they didn’t do this now. He smelled a saliva-wet finger pushing in, slick, to a moist, willing opening and tried not to think about Scott giving it up to Howlett in that flame-lit bed.

Aloud, he said, “Look, if it’s any consolation, if he’s out he’ll probably get himself killed doing something heroic. He’s nearly done that dozens of times in the past. It’s just in the past he had people with better power-sets looking out for him. Course, the kids he’s been rescuing could all be omega level mutants for all I know, but broken-powers Barbie and the muppet of magnetism ain’t exactly Jean Grey and Storm.”

“No, Logan, that isn’t any kind of consolation to me at all.”

There was so long he could maintain this don’t-give-a-shit-shell and then the cracks started to appear. One got through now. “Me neither.” Another awkward pause before Logan said, “Are we gonna talk about that thing we’re not talking about?”

“What of the many things we’re not talking about do you mean, Logan?”

He had to make himself say it, but the image was still there in his head and it was in Rogers’ head, too. No point ducking the issue. “That, according to what we saw in Scott’s head, he didn’t kill Charles Xavier.”

“We saw him kill Charles Xavier.”

When they passed the water’s edge this time, he saw them reflected: Rogers so tall and handsome, and him so squat and…not. He remembered the way he looked in Scott’s head; some better self reflected there, maddening and misguided but still a hero, unflinchingly recognized as a murderer, and yet, somehow, a hero all the same. He wondered, with a twist of yearning, if Scott really did know him better than he knew himself. If he really was the guy Scott thought he was.

Doggedly, Logan said, “But he wasn’t home at the time, was he? That memory he keeps chasing, trying to see if he really did it. That isn’t there. It isn’t anywhere in his head. I was looking for it and I bet you were, too. What he said is the truth, he didn’t do it, at least not the Scott Summers that existed before and after the Phoenix was in charge.”

“He had choices!”

“No argument here, Cap. Maybe there were stops and maybe there weren’t but the truth is that he didn’t even try to jump off once that thing hit home, and he sure did enjoy remaking the world to be Famine-Free Drought-Free Limitless Energy No More Wars Totally-Unsustainable-Given-Human-Nature Happytown and generally revealing himself to be even more of a naïve dickhead than I thought he was. Still doesn’t alter the fact that, whoever and whatever killed Charles Xavier, you filter out the phoenix flame and the crazy and Charles Xavier would still be alive.”

The panic and confusion and hysteria and anger as a human being attacked on all sides squirmed in the cage of a god furious at being opposed was not something he wanted to keep remembering. Like that damned arrow of Barton’s hitting home, over and fucking over again.
“Oh and remind me to stab Hawkeye in the neck with one of his own arrows as soon as possible.”

“The Avengers are not carrying the can for the X-Men’s mistakes, Logan.”

“If you listen to Frost, the Avengers don’t even carry the can for their own mistakes.”

“You agree with her?”

“No, but that wasn’t all trauma and spite back there. That was a transmission from the heart and she really does think we fucked the five of them over then hung them out to dry then walked away like Pontius Pilates, pretending we had clean hands.”

“No one came out of this with clean hands. We just didn’t screw up as much as Summers did.”

Logan shrugged. “Given how much Cyke can screw up even on a good day I don’t think I’d want to be presenting that as my get out of hell free card when I was standing in front of the pearly gates, Cap.”

Rogers put a hand up to his head, crisp blond hair unusually disheveled, as the night wind licked at it lovingly. “I don’t think there’s a way to fix this. What Frost said on the plane, some of it was just the stress of the situation, but a lot of it was real. That’s really how she feels. That’s what she believes happened and that’s who she thinks we are – the guys with our head in the sand who care more about everyone following the rules than we do about the fact that her people have been persecuted for decades.”

“Steve, if I thought that, I wouldn’t be on this team, nor would Hank.”

“But there’s no common ground between them and us, Logan. It was in Summers’ head, too. He thinks we invaded Utopia because we didn’t think their autonomy mattered and I have no respect for him as a person. He thinks we tried to stop the Phoenix Force because we don’t think mutants are important in the greater scheme of things. He thinks they – mutants – are always going to be that lower priority we might get to one day if we’re not too busy with the ‘real people’. The unity team hasn’t done a damned thing to change their minds. They just see it as lip-service. He thinks that if he doesn’t go out and fight for the emerging mutants that literally no one else will. I don’t see a way forward as long as he thinks like that. He’s never going to trust us. He’s never going to believe the rules that we uphold are valid or that they even apply to him any more because he thinks this is a world where there’s one law for humans and one law for mutants.”

“Because there is,” Logan said. “Or there has been, more than once. That’s not his paranoia talking, Cap, that’s his experience of being a mutant in a world where the government gave power to Bastion and Norman Osborn. Which isn’t to say Cyke’s not paranoid – because he is. But he’s not pulling everything out of his tautly clenched butt.”

“You agree with him?”

Rogers sounded so hurt. They were circling back to where they’d begun now, the scent of the teenagers and their small, surprised sounds growing fainter.

Logan said equably. “You got an infodump in your head today that you didn’t want and no one would enjoy. You’re still processing and right now you’re rattled and you’re angry and you’re hurt that there was no trust there today, not from Frost and not from Scott and not from Lehnsherr. You risked your team breaking into a secret prison and you rescued a guy who has been a major pain in your ass and it would have been nice if they’d acknowledged that with anything other than mistrust. Right?”
Rogers sighed and nodded.

“Okay, well, that’s what being an X-Man is like, all the time. That’s how Cyke grew up. Saving people at the risk of his own life who wouldn’t stop hating and fearing him, however much good he did. And he went out there and did it anyway. We all did. And sometimes it really sucked. And some of us died doing it. Now you know how it feels.”

Rogers ran a hand through his hair. “He’s so damaged. If he turns super-villain….”

“He won’t.”

“He has the childhood of a serial killer.”

“And you spent decades trapped in a block of ice and woke up to find everyone you ever loved had died. That would make a pretty good villain backstory, wouldn’t it? Stark’s a nervous breakdown on legs. I’m a walking disaster area, and Hank’s a bi-polar depressive who just brought his teenage self forward from the past because he was feeling nostalgic. I’m not saying Cyke’s not damaged or crazy. I think he’s both. I just don’t think he’s any more damaged or crazy than you, me, or everyone else we work with on a regular basis.”

“They’re all villains, Logan. They have a secret, probably underground, base, which for all I know has torches in skulls for lighting. Magneto was a villain, Emma Frost was a villain, Illyana Rasputin was a villain. Given ultimate power, Summers was a villain who murdered the man who raised him. I don’t think I can just let them run around fomenting revolution and say that I owe them that because sometimes being a mutant…sucks.”

Logan needed something amber that came in a bottle. He needed to get back to the school, to check that the mutant kids under his care were okay. “Go and sleep off that headache, Rogers. You don’t have to do anything about Summers right now because he’s not even in this world any more. He’s run off to help Howlett. Again.” That last word came out clogged with bitterness.

Rogers frowned. “Why does that bother you so much? His relationship with Howlett has nothing to do with his relationship with you.”

“No. He’s never put out for me.” Logan grimaced. “Forget I said that. I’m tired. It’s been a long day.” They were back at the gates of the Avengers mansion and he didn’t feel like coming in so he stood his ground.

Quietly, Rogers said, “Logan, if I ever suspect that the mutant population got divided into two squabbling camps eventually leading to the planet nearly getting burned up by phoenix fire and the death of Charles Xavier because you and Summers didn’t deal with your unresolved sexual tension in a timely fashion, I will ask the Hercules from this dimension to throw you into Tartarus.”

Logan shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t think that’s what it is that’s wrong between us. It might be a part of it but….”

“It better not be,” Rogers said shortly. “I’m serious about Tartarus, and if that is what the problem is between the two of you then I am ordering you to damn well fix it.”

“You can’t order me to have sex with Scott Summers!”

Captain America glared at Logan, a searing blue-eyed, soul-stripping glance, and walked off with athletic grace and stalwart purpose towards the mansion. “Watch me,” he said crisply.
Logan turned to find a zitty student with an iPod was filming him gleefully. He wondered if Quire had found a way to spawn himself. The guy said, “You do know #whydonttheyjustscrewalready has been trending on twitter for a while now, right?”

There was a yelp and the splinter of expensive technology breaking, and then Logan was heading for the school he had named after Scott Summers’ dead wife, with the thought of a whiskey bottle calling to him like siren song to a sailor.

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Logan wasn’t usually one for physics. However he had no trouble believing that time was passing slower here than in that dimension where Scott had run off to rescue Howlett from an all-powerful sorceress who liked transforming men into animals for the fun of making them squeal, with a back-up team composed of two nerdy teenagers and a Spider-Man lunchbox spell-suppressor. He believed it because it was impossible that time could be passing slower anywhere else than it was with him stuck here, not knowing what the hell was going on, as the hours crawled past. Without Howlett with him in Hades, that minotaur might have had its way with Scott, and without Hercules showing up, Achilles certainly would have done. Even with all his martial arts training, with no eye beams, Scott was vulnerable in that place, and was handicapped by being a) clueless about some birds and bees related matters, and b) apparently being essence of catnip for every hybrid manbeast and monster with a hard-on in the whole damned dimension. What Logan didn’t know – what no one seemed able to tell him was what twenty-seven hours in this time zone meant for Scott in that dimension.

Beast had tried explaining to him for most of the morning exactly why it was that time worked differently in the realm where Scott was now vacationing. That realm where Scott was now vacationing with Howlett. He had explained it using a lot of equations on a white board and then using an orrery and several objects plucked randomly from the fruit bowl before returning to the white board to draw black sweeping lines of what he clearly imagined to be elucidation. His teenage self had joined him in the end and they had proceeded to elucidate together to – as far as Logan was concerned – the texture and consistency of mud.

Very clearly, so that they could not possibly mistake this for an invitation to start drawing arrowed equations again, Logan said: “How. Long. Has. Cyke. Been. In. Mythology. World?” His ‘With Howlett’ was silent but he just knew McCoy was hearing it. It was on Young Hank’s account that he had at the last minute exchanged that ‘Mythology World’ for the ‘AssRape World’ that he called it in his head.

McCoy said, “No possible way of telling.”

His younger self nodded sagely, as if anything they had just told Logan had been in any way useful. “It’s a variable time differential. Imagine it’s as if you’re pouring mercury out of one glass and water out of the other, each onto a moving conveyor belt, but the two different conveyor belts have completely different gear systems meaning – ”

This had in no way been the first annoying science simile of the day. “Meaning that today is gut a scientist day?” Logan suggested pleasantly. “And is there a two-for-one special?”

The two McCoys exchanged glances, one long-suffering, the other mildly perplexed. Blue-furred McCoy placed a sympathetic hand on his younger self’s shoulder. “We should leave him alone. There’s really very little point in talking to him when he’s like this.”

As they headed through the door, Logan said, “What if he needs our help? How can I tell if things are taking too long when I don’t know how long they’ve been taking?”
Younger McCoy said, “But I thought he hated the adult version of Scott?”

Older McCoy said, “Theirs is a complex and infinitely dysfunctional relationship. Rendered as an equation it would probably fill football stadiums and quite possibly split space and time asunder.”

“So does he hate him or doesn’t he?”

“It’s really more of a Schrödinger’s cat situation. At any given time Logan at once both hates and doesn’t hate and loves and doesn’t love Scott Summers; just one of the many reasons why they are at once better apart and completely incapable of remaining so. Many people feel that only marooning them on a desert island together and leaving them to sort out their differences for a few years could even get close to solving the problem of their chronically incompatible codependency. Personally, I think they’d murder each other before the end of the first week. That, or start co-parenting an orphan seabird whom they unaccountably decided to name ‘Gerald’.”

Logan called after him waspishly, “I wasn’t gonna tell ya, Hank, but that last mutation made you look fat.”

Sighing in his most long-suffering fashion, McCoy said over his shoulder, “Logan, Scott will come back when he does. And if you’re really going to function this badly every time he’s in Howlett’s orbit you might want to think about putting up a fight for him. Although you might also bear in mind that he seems happier there than here.”

“That place isn’t good for him,” Logan insisted. “It won’t let him be who he really is. It just wants him to be some pretty boy who gets felt up by…things and hangs out naked with Howlett.”

“Well, you may need to tell Scott that – as he seems to be laboring under the delusion that he had a very nice time there and could hardly wait to go back.”

That, unfortunately, was true. Scott probably thought he was having a good time right at this very minute, no doubt having slow, considerate love made to him by bastard Howlett and his horse-cocked boyfriend…unless, of course, Scott was a prisoner on some evil witch’s magical island – probably being kept as a sex-slave for her perverted use. (The question of what kind of costume fitted in a bag as small as the one Young Kurt had been carrying had been niggling at Logan for some time now.)

As they moved away along the school corridor, he heard Young Hank say, “Did he say ‘naked’? No, don’t answer that. Just please tell me we’re not telling Scott about this?”

“We are not breathing a word to him about any of this. Miss Pryde has been most emphatic on that subject. Quite homicidally so.”

Logan waited for them to go completely away so he could brood his way back to his own office without conversation buzzing at him. He knew he was right about how Scott should not be in that…mythology world without someone from his own dimension to remind him of who he really was. For all Logan knew, twenty-seven hours could be six months in that place. Scott could be pregnant with Howlett’s cubs or married to a minotaur by now. In a place in which magic was as abundant as rainwater, biology did what the hell it liked, and physics just made crap up when it was bored, literally anything could have happened to him.

As he made his way back to his office, Logan noticed that, outside, the birds were twittering in an annoyingly upbeat fashion and the peace was only disturbed by the occasional shriek as the Danger Room program started running in the bathrooms again. It was like the day was being beautiful and tranquil on purpose, just to piss him off.
He got back to his own room in time to see three bamfs making off with the whiskey bottle from the bottom drawer of his desk. Logan hurled a paperweight after them, which dented the wall but had no impact upon them whatsoever; their little blue forked tails whisking a derisive farewell in his direction as they teleported off in their pungent mini sulfur clouds. Luckily, he had several bottles hidden around the room they hadn’t found yet.

Most importantly of all, they had not yet got their sticky little blue fingers on the bottle he now kept in the safe in his office that McCoy had promised him was incapable of access even by teleportation. There hadn’t been an invoice address with it, and there sure as hell hadn’t been a card, but it had been bought and paid for and sent straight from the distillery in Scotland: a boxed bottle of 30-year old Black Bowmore, Islay single malt whiskey, wax-sealed to perfection. It had tasted incredible: fruit, peat, and power all combined to such a concentration that his first sip of it had made him stagger from the intensity. As he had rolled it tentatively over his tongue, letting it slip down across his tonsils, cautiously, it had tasted even better as the anonymous proof that Emma Frost no longer hated him quite so much. He suspected it might be an even more magnificent gift than its price label suggested. It might be a truly magnanimous one, too. Perhaps it was just in his head, but he felt that when Emma had sent him that bottle of insanely expensive Scotch she had also given him her cautious blessing to his rescue of Scott from Howlett; that she had given Scott, not to the good, kind man who didn’t love him, but to the complicated monster who, uncomfortably and resentfully, perhaps still did.

He was saving Emma’s gift for special occasions, so he grabbed the one he kept taped to the bottom of the desk instead and took a generous swig before he carefully taped it back in place.

Someone – probably Quire – had set up a school messageboard where the question had been posed: Is Professor Logan a secret drinker?

Logan, bored, had ended up posting on it himself: No, he’s not. He’s a public drinker who only has to hide his booze because those thieving little blue shitheads keep stealing it. Someone, almost certainly Hank, had gone in and changed his post to ‘little blue ****heads’ and informed the forum ominously that new technology being implemented school-wide would soon be censoring obscene electronic messages on all devices, personal and public.

It was still a beautiful bright sunny day outside, blue skies, white fluffy clouds, all that crap, and all Logan could think about was that if Scott never came back, if Logan never knew what had happened to him, then he would never get over it. Indulging himself in hating him had been an easy luxury when he could see him on the news every few days being an asshole, glower at him horribly, and know that he was fine. This was different. This was life being turned into an eternal dentist’s waiting room, knowing there was a root canal coming but not quite when.

If he had thought the guy wasn’t really safe with Magik, Frost, and Magneto as his back-up team in a relatively sane dimension, why the hell had he thought it was okay to let him go alone into one where nothing made sense, hippogriffs happened, and, with Hercules and Howlett both benched, his only support team was a couple of kids?

Logan wished he could get back to not caring. Not caring had been so much more comfortable than this. Even if it had been an illusion the whole time that could always have been shattered by any peril coming to Scott, it had been a convincing illusion and Logan had believed in it. He had been armored by it, like Hisako with her psionic field: He didn’t give a damn about Scott Summers any more. The guy wasn’t his responsibility. Wasn’t his problem. If he got himself killed that was on his head. Nothing to do with Logan…. All nice, hateful, comforting thoughts. But, no, it wasn’t that easy, because it turned out that Scott Summers was a walking yeast infection, and every time you thought you were cured of him, he flared right back up again, the itch of him driving you insane.
“Why is this taking you so damned long?” Logan demanded of the ether. “And you’d better not have stopped off for a quickie after rescuing those two when you know I’ve got no way of knowing if you’re alive or dead right now!” He downed a bitter burn of inferior whiskey. “You always were a clueless shit, Cyke. You probably don’t even know I’m going nuts here right now even though you’re in a place – on purpose – that has centaurs running around in it.”

That was when there was a soft popping sound and a silhouette appeared in front of Logan’s window, so haloed by dazzling sunlight that his features were impossible to make out, but Logan would have known that outline anywhere. Stifling his relief into a convincing gruffness, he opened the window and said, “You took your time, Summers.”

Scott ducked in through the window gracefully and Logan, blinking from the sunlight, tried to stifle that smirk that kept wanting out, he was so damned relieved to see him in one piece. “Did you save your boyfriends from the evil sorceress?”

“Yes. We had to go with Plan Three, though, which obviously wasn’t ideal, but they’re back at Hercules’ palace – in their proper form. Are you still interested in helping to steal Poseidon’s trident?”

Given that it would have taken flying horses at least to make him miss out on the chance of another adventure, not to mention the chance to steer Scott away from Howlett, Logan thought his casual shrug was masterly. “Sure. Why not? How did you get Circe to let Howlett and Hercules go?” He moved in closer, still blinking from the sunlight that had speared his eyes, needing to check for a few things on Scott’s scent.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Logan’s interest was piqued. “Things get a little kinky…?”

“That Circe woman makes Madelyne on her worst day look like a Girl Scout Cookie seller. In fact that whole dimension needs to…take up some more wholesome hobbies. Logan, what are you doing?”

He was sniffing him – which he would have thought was obvious – and although there were the tantalizing remnants of a lot of strange scents all over him, and he had obviously done a lot of very thorough washing recently in rose-petaled water, he didn’t smell like he had when he stepped through the last portal. Wherever he had been, it had clearly not been recently rolling around on the silk sheets with Howlett and Hercules. He inhaled him again and Scott stood there, long-sufferingly, and endured it, then, as Logan breathed on his neck, spiked a little heat build and swallowed like his mouth was dry.

Logan smirked. “You didn’t have sex with Howlett.”

“None of your business,” Scott retorted.

“They got behind schedule without you there to mission-lead them,” Logan said, still smugly. “You need to go get that trident today and you want me to help you.”

“Didn’t I just say so?”

Logan sniffed him again, luxuriating in his scent and the way Scott shivered despite his best efforts not to when Logan’s breath gusted over his skin. “You wanted to sleep with Howlett and with Hercules, because that place wants you to, but you’re a good little team leader and you don’t let demigods and viceroys get distracted by sex when it takes them six hours to get through all that
foreplay when you have a mission to run.”

Logan stepped back, and then, as he got far enough away to get Scott in focus without the sun half-blindling him, he gulped in disbelief.

That costume. Logan had seen Scott naked, so no clothing should have been able to get him more hot and bothered than that, but this wisp of sheer blue was designed to be tantalizing. It drew attention to the smooth enticement of his skin, and the long, leanly-muscled line of his endless legs, the bump…bump…bump of all those taut-ridged abdominal muscles and absurdly slim waist. It fluttered around his ass as if it was deliberately drawing the attention that way, and the way it left his right shoulder bare made Logan want to bite it. It had also bared half of his chest, and there was Scott’s rosy right nipple right there in front of him, asking to be mouthed. It didn’t help at all that the sunlight chose that moment to pour in through the window glass so eagerly, imbuing Scott’s skin with a soft golden light. Even the sandals seemed to be making a peepshow of toes that Logan suddenly found himself wanting to lick spirits from – Southern Comfort, he thought, poured over them slowly and then hungrily sucked off.

“What the hell are you wearing?” Logan demanded, as his jeans constricted him cruelly and something dried up his throat.

“It’s the stupid mythology. Everyone has to dress like this.” Scott said it dismissively, as if it was in no way the most come-hitherish costume that a guy had ever barely worn over his perfectly proportioned body. “I don’t know what it’s called – if that’s what you mean.”

“It’s called a ‘Come Here And Fuck Me’ costume,” Logan said.

Scott looked down at himself, nonplussed. “That doesn’t sound very likely. I’ve told Hercules that this is really inappropriate footwear for a combat situation. These things have no grip at all.”

“You do know you’re naked?” Logan said, reasonably, he thought, under the circumstances. “Because even the parts of you that handkerchief you’re wearing covers are still visible because that material is frickin’ see-through. No wonder every monster in Hades kept trying to make scaly hell-babies with you.”

Scott launched into the inevitable pompous lecture about how they had always told the teenagers in their care that although they should dress appropriately for weather and environment, there was very emphatically no such thing as ‘asking for it’, and he really hoped that Logan didn’t have a policy at his school of –

Logan really needed him to shut up because Scott was annoying when he was like this and he’d had his share of annoying from Scott, but that didn’t necessarily explain why he abruptly swept everything off his desk, grabbed Scott and slammed him down onto it – cushioning his head with one hand and rediscovering how soft Scott’s chestnut hair was in the process – and then climbed on top of him to hungrily mouth at his right nipple, while ripping at his own belt buckle and zipper to free his abruptly engorged cock.

“Logan, what are you –? Oh… Oh…! Ah…!”

And, one advantage of having been in Scott’s head while he had sex with Howlett and Hercules and everyone else was that Logan now knew where all his erogenous zones were. He licked his way through them hungrily, nibbling and biting when a spine arch felt like something he just had to have from Scott. He licked up his inner thighs, and bit down his concave belly, and ripped off the stupid loin cloth so he could suck on his cock and mouth his balls hungrily, and Scott moaned and gasped and demanded to know, breathlessly, what exactly was –
As Logan scrambled in his desk drawer for something appropriately slick, he said, “This is what’s happening, Slim…” He put his finger in his mouth to demonstrate, wetted it thoroughly, held it up, saliva-coated, for any slow kids at the back, and then slid it into him. And it was even better than he’d imagined it, the warm tightness and the yielding, and the way Scott canted up his legs and arched his back in a gratifyingly enthusiastic response.

Scott said breathlessly, “Is the door locked?”

“I don’t give a shit. The whole school can get an eyeful for all I care. Everything I just licked is still mine.” Logan kissed him hungrily; punishing kisses for having done this with Howlett first when he could so easily have done it with him. “I was just down the fucking hall on Utopia, Slim. Emma thought we’d done it in Japan. We could have done it a hundred times over. But, no, you had to run off with Howlett. You had to be the same awkward bastard you always are.”

“Your pillow talk needs work,” Scott told him. “And – just to be clear – you were picking up your doctorate from Awkward Bastard University when I was still in Mildly Annoying Kindergarten.” But his mouth was opening to let in Logan’s tongue, and he whined a sharp protest when Logan stopped kissing his mouth, and then flexed eagerly when Logan kissed and mouthed and then bit his throat. Logan kissed back down to that maddeningly perky nipple and sucked on it until Scott was wailing and arching and Logan could work two fingers into him while Scott took it just right.

Hoarsely, Logan growled, “I have never wanted anything in my life as much as I wanna shove my dick in you right now.”

Scott panted, “Eat your heart out Omar Khayyám, there’s a new love poet in town.”

“Shut up and kiss me, Summers.”

Scott did so, incredibly well, and Logan was dizzy by the time Scott finally let him up for air. “Fuck! And I always thought Jean loved you for your mind.”

“You mean you don’t?”

“With that butt as part of the package? Are you kidding me?”

Logan kissed him back hungrily as he kept working two fingers into his ridiculously tight ass while Scott squirmed and made pained whimpering moans that were the hottest thing he had ever heard.

Scott whispered: “Do it now.”

Logan said, “You’re not ready…” and then remembered that this was Scott, who secretly liked sex to hurt a little, and that was the one thing Howlett hadn’t given him, because Howlett hadn’t known that about him while Logan did. He slicked himself and Scott up in double-quick time, and said, “Stop me if it’s too much.” He got a brief nod from Scott and then pushed in, watching his face.

Scott wailed and arched and clutched at Logan’s arms and said through gritted teeth, “I will kill you if you stop. Deeper, please, Logan….”

When Logan took him at his word and shoved balls deep into him, he had to clamp a hand over Scott’s mouth to stifle the noise he made. “Jesus, Slim! You sound like a cat being strangled.”

“Fuck! Logan, you son-of-a-bitch….”

It was embarrassing how hot it was making him hearing the Boy Scout cursing. “Did that hurt?” Logan said.
“Yes, damn you!”

“Want me to do it again, harder?”

And he just knew that behind the visor that was a flickering, embarrassed under the lashes look Scott was throwing his way as he murmured that shame-faced, “God, yes…”

“I’m only doing it the way you like it this time because you’re weird and I feel sorry for you,” Logan assured him. “Next time we’re doing it my way – with dinner in a nice restaurant and then proper foreplay.”

“Whatever you say, Logan.”

Logan tried not to think about how likely it was that any strategy of his would work when Scott could outthink most generals on the planet, and only had to open his legs to have an immediate tactical advantage.

He thrust and Scott yowled with deliriously pained pleasure while Logan tried to stifle the noises he made with deep, rough kisses to accompany his deep, rough thrusts. When Scott’s long legs wrapped themselves around his back and Scott’s long arms wrapped themselves around his neck, Logan realized that he was feeling insanely turned on, ridiculously happy, and quite obnoxiously smug.

“I’m doing this for the sake of mutantkind because Cap said I had to fuck you for the greater good,” he told him.

Scott smirked in his most annoying manner. “Whatever you have to tell yourself to get through this ordeal, Logan.”

“You needn’t think my buttons are so damned easy to push that all it takes is an ass-flash and a nip-slip and I’m yours.”

“Thought never crossed my mind,” Scott murmured, arching his back into Logan’s rapid thrusts so he could get the full benefit of every pounding inch.

“I’m serious – this was my choice. I’m the one in control here. And that’s how it’s gonna be. So you’d better not think you’re gonna be able to manipulate me with your…wiles.”

Scott said, “What wiles?”

Mollified, Logan remembered that Scott didn’t really have any seduction technique so this was one area where Logan was indeed in charge and more experienced in every possible way. He thrust deep and hard, the way Scott wanted it, andmouthed at his bottom lip, then sank his teeth into his throat while Scott made strangled sounds that were brain-seizingly hot, and whispered begging requests for Logan to do it harder and faster and deeper and bite him some more, please, please, until Logan had left love-bites all down his neck and was slamming into him with window-rattling force while Scott flexed and clenched back to meet him while clinging to his shoulders like Logan was a life raft and they were both being storm-tossed at sea.

He had never fucked anyone that hard in his life, and perhaps there was a little edge of punishment to it for how angry Scott had made him in the past, but he wasn’t angry now, he was just triumphant. Admittedly, Scott’s feline yowls and Logan’s canine barks of pleasure did make it sound like a vet’s waiting room had got high on drugs and then tried to kill each other, but he suspected the rhythmic slam-slam-slam of Scott’s perfect ass onto the desk was probably broadcasting a more accurate story.

He was right on the edge of coming, everything tightening beautifully, when he realized that he was
sweating and panting with harsh, lustful pants, his laboring rhythm ragged with exhaustion, while Scott was lying there comfortably on his back, glowing nicely, and stretching luxuriously into every prostate pulse, mouth open as his tongue tasted the flavor of their last kiss, one arm across his forehead, completely and maddeningly relaxed. Logan grabbed his dick and gave it a less than gentle tug that made Scott yelp. “Stop enjoying yourself so much, you bastard, Slim.”

“You’re not having fun yet?”

“I’m doing all the work!”

Scott ran his tongue tantalizingly over his lower lip. “What do you want me to do?”

Logan suspected his whole aura was murky with lust right now. He growled: “How about you assume the slave position and call me ‘Master’?” You know, the way you were this close to doing with frickin’ Hercules. He pulled out and snatched a breath, waiting for Scott to tell him to go fuck himself, while Scott instead effortlessly flipped over onto his hands and knees on the desk, bent his head and said, “Like this?”

Logan dry-mouthed at the sight of the poem of an ass just presented to him, managed thickly, “And…we’re still doing what you want, aren’t we…?”

Scott said, “We can pretend you don’t get off on it if you like?”

Logan growled, “Shut up.” But he couldn’t help a grin breaking out because Howlett wasn’t into this stuff at all, and even Hercules had only played at it, whereas Logan had buried needs that did indeed dwell in the dark tarry hollow behind his loins and Scott had just tapped into that place like a pro. “I’m not doing anything kinky,” he warned, treading down all the kinky things he really wanted to do that were currently arm wrestling all the gentle, tender, romantic things he wanted to do for ascendancy, because – he was not that guy. Even if Scott was currently making him cling to his better self by the tip of an adamantium claw, definitely…not that guy.

Scott said obediently, “Whatever you say, Logan.”

“You’re not calling me ‘Master’?” He hadn’t meant that to come out so plaintive.

“This isn’t a dom-sub thing, Logan. You have to earn any titles I give you.”

And…they were back to Scott giving the orders and playing him like a fiddle. Logan punished him for making him feel a secret thrill at that prospect with a rough thrust and Scott made exactly the pained pleasure groans that Logan had been aching to hear - half protest and half warning - like it hurt so much Scott could hardly take it but he would kill Logan if he even thought about stopping. Shame at how basic he was being did lick up inside him but the pleasure spike was higher. For a few minutes the new position just felt so damned satisfying on every possible level, including the reprehensible ones, and Scott was having such a good time with the hard, fast, good time that Logan was having that conversation was out of the question, and then Logan found a new, variable rhythm, rapid followed by deep and then shallow followed by fast that made Scott start to yowl on a rising octave that was indeed music to Logan’s ears. Logan suspected that his own murky, lustful odor was now coming off him in equal parts shamefaced and smug as he said, “So, maybe I will come on this dumbass adventure with you – but no more sleeping with Howlett or Hercules. I’m sick of being everyone’s fly-by booty call. I want some exclusivity.”

Scott gripped the edge of the desk while his spine arched and his mouth opened and closed and nothing came out except ecstatic moans.
Logan said, “I’ll take that as a ‘yes’.” He shoved into him just right and gave a little hip twist that made Scott wail loud enough for everyone in the school to hear him. “I’ll take that as another ‘yes’.” He concentrated on what he was doing – and although he said it himself, what he was doing was pretty damned awesome – and Scott began to dissolve into shuddering, wailing pulses that shivered through Logan like essence of orgasm. And Logan usually had more self control than this, but Scott’s whole body was shaking with wave after wave of pleasure and he got pulled in after him, like a second drowner tugged into the sea, the shuddering ecstasy from Scott’s body reverberating straight to his balls so he came with a triumphant, wolfish roar that echoed off every metal object in the room like a clap of thunder.

He had to pull out fast and grab Scott who slumped bonelessly into a gratifying post-orgasmic half-swoon, and would have concussed himself if Logan hadn’t had ferally fast reflexes. He hauled a semi-fainting Scott up against his chest and stroked his sweaty hair back from his forehead.

“Scott…? Are you okay…?”

Scott came back to awareness and immediately curled in against him drowsily, murmuring, “That was great, Logan. We should do that again. Maybe lock the door next time so no one finds out.”

“Everyone in the school just knows we fucked, Scott. In fact, the amount of noise you made, everyone in Westchester probably knows we fucked.”

“You were louder than me,” Scott said sleepily. He whispered in Logan’s ear, “Maybe next time we could….” Scott sketched a scenario in short, pithy phrases that was breath-stealingly bad and wrong.

Logan’s eyes bulged and he felt an agonizing twitch in his cock as it valiantly tried to overcome biology and make itself ready. Logan said hastily, “No! Definitely not! Nothing like that. No weird stuff. Next time, I buy you dinner and there’s candlelight and…wine and silverware and stuff. We could…go see a movie maybe.” But absolutely not either marry you right now, keep you chained up in the basement like I still kinda want to, or do that very wrong thing you just whispered in my ear.

Scott said, “Okay.”

“Don’t just say ‘okay’ because you think that’s not gonna happen because you’re gonna spring some kinky slaveboy thing on me and I’m just gonna go along with it because I have no self-control. Because that’s not happening.”

“Never crossed my mind,” said Scott virtuously. He was snuggling in against Logan like he was going to take a nap and it was giving Logan an embarrassingly acute case of the warm fuzzies. Ro wasn’t a snuggler. Most of the women in Logan’s life had not been snugglers, more of the handcuff Logan to the bedpost type – which was fine, he was up for being the handcuffer or handcuffee – but Scott seemed to be okay both with being handcuffed to the bedpost and then snuggling afterwards, which was a novelty for Logan. He found that he was still stroking Scott’s damp hair back from his visor and dabbing apologetic kisses down the cheekbone he’d bruised. He felt incredibly moved by how much Scott had just trusted him and full of aching tenderness for him. He might have had to blink quite hard.

“Do you want…compliments and stuff…?” he said tentatively.

Scott curled into the kisses in a way that made Logan’s balls and heart ache pleasurably. “An approving grunt is always acceptable.”

“I’m just saying I’ve known worse lays.”
“I thought you were amazing,” Scott said with perfect sincerity, and Logan felt a ridiculous thrill of pleasure.

Logan said gruffly, as he kissed on down his jaw-line, “Don’t get used to that rough stuff because that’s just gonna be an occasional thing.”

“Whatever you say, Logan.”

Logan found that he was settling him more comfortably so Scott’s head was pillowed on his shoulder, enjoying the relaxed weight of him. Scott rubbed his head against Logan’s shoulder coaxingly, and there was something about the way the visor made that little jag of contact that made Logan have to breathe carefully not to start getting hard again, like he’d been imagining that sensation for a long time before he felt it.

Logan said, “But, just out of interest, that…kinky shit, if I did that, would you call me ‘Master’ then?”

Scott said, “You could try it and find out.”

Logan inhaled his scent and Scott smelled warmly and exclusively of him: their sweat and Logan come and Scott come and lots of possessive Logan pheromones saying ‘Hands off – this guy’s mine’.

“Are you gonna tell me where you live now?”

Scott snorted. “Of course not. Are you going to quit the Avengers, stop being a worthless sellout, and join the mutant revolution?”

“Fuck, no. Whole bunch of ya lawbreakers ought to be in prison if you ask me.”

“Are you going to tell me that I was right about everything, ever, Logan? Because in your heart you know I am.”

“Fuck, no, to the power of infinity. Are you gonna tell me how right I am?”

“Not even if you set me on fire. You’re as wrong as it gets.”

Well, that was annoying but also, oddly…right. “So, seeing as Beast probably already texted the Avengers about this and they’re gonna start mocking us in about another thirty seconds, you want me to come dimension-hopping with you and help you steal that fish god’s garden fork?”

Logan’s phone made the noise it did when he had a text. He picked it up and looked to see that Hawkeye had texted him with:

**McCoy says Summers sounds like a Siamese cat with its tail under a rocking chair when you’re banging him. True or False?**

Logan texted back: **** off, Barton. I mean it.

And tell Slutclops that if he lowers his standards any further, bestiality will be a step up.

Logan two-finger texted with vicious emphasis: **** off and die, Barton!

He wondered if Jarvis was the one censoring his texts or if the school’s long-threatened bowdlerize-at-source Web Nanny was now working; either way it was very annoying and he needed to get it
dismantled as soon as possible. He also wanted to deck Hawkeye because he’d been thinking that Scott being willing to sleep with him had said something positive about who Logan was, and now he wasn’t so sure. As casually as he could, Logan said: “Scott – you wouldn’t let an animal fuck ya, would you?”

Scott said drowsily, “Define ‘animal’?”

Logan realized that with a world with Beast in it, that was not as easy as a question he’d been thinking.

Scott was still murmuring, “…I mean if they were human when I first knew them and they still had a human consciousness but just happened to have an animal form permanently or temporarily, that would just be the outer casing. The person inside would still be the same, wouldn’t it…?”

Well, that was probably the Beast question answered although not necessarily in the way that Logan wanted, but… An uncomfortable thought occurred to him. “Scott – when that Circe witch slapped that spell on Howlett and Hercules, what was it she turned them into? And tell me you didn’t have to…?” Perhaps luckily for both of them he was interrupted by his phone again.

McCoy’s text said: #WolvieClopsAGoGo now trending on twitter. Yes, it was Quire. Am attempting damage control but the information superhighway is an untameable beast. Kitty is keeping Original X-Men away from the Internet until further notice. She has managed to convince Young Scott the noise coming from your office involved administration of life-saving medication to uncooperative polecat. Was surprisingly easy sell. She did mention something about killing you and Adult Scott, however. Seemed to be searching for weapon(s) of some kind before heading your way. P.S. Be grateful that the school’s automatic censorship program for all electronic communication has finally kicked in.

The next text was from Stark and read:

Summer’s masochism and self-loathing clearly now so out of control that intervention only solution. Will arrange to have him renditioned to paradise island forthwith for couch potato therapy. Suggest you sedate him now before men in white coats arrive – you know, if you can see through the tears of your post-coital crying.

Logan snarled as it occurred to him that Stark was rich enough to be as much of an asshole as he wanted to be. “Stark’s probably kidding, but just in case he isn’t….”

Scott sat up, going, as always, from practically asleep to wide awake in a microsecond. “Is that a helicopter I can hear?”

“Yeah, we should go.” Logan sprang to his feet. Throwing Scott his loincloth and hastily pulling his jeans back up, he said, “To the other dimension. Now.”

“You don’t want to wait and find out who it is in the helicopter?”

“No and – trust me on this – neither do you.”

Scott’s face turned wary as he finished with the loincloth. “What’s going on?”

Trying not to be distracted by that damned nipple again, or the way the breeze from the open window was fluttering Scott’s gauzy costume temptingly over his perfectly taut and now enticingly semen-spattered ass, Logan said, “It’s possible that some of the Avengers might have cited you
sleeping with me as proof that yer…well…nuts.”

“They’re planning to get me involuntarily committed under the Mental Health Act because I had sex with you?”

“Yep.”

“Would it negatively impact on our relationship if I killed some of your friends?”

“Nah. Wanna start with Barton?”

There was an angry banging on the door and Kitty’s voice said, “Logan? Scott? Can I have a word? About discretion? And remembering that there are vulnerable young people in the building?” She lowered her voice to hiss viciously through the keyhole: “Some of whom must never, ever, ever find out what you two irresponsible assholes just did so very, very loudly.”

“Teen Slim’s gonna have to find out his older self has sex sometime, Kitty,” Logan offered, hastily rebuckling his belt.

“But not with you!” The rest of it was hissed with such venom that even Logan couldn’t make it all out, but there was definitely something about ‘traumatized enough’ and ‘break his fragile mind completely’ and possibly ‘below anyone’s minimum standards of acceptable…’. He was trying not to be hurt by that impassioned: ‘What was Scott thinking?’ While her answer to his innocent: “But I thought you wanted me and Cyke to kiss and make up?’ sounded like an angry serpent someone had just stepped on.

“Seems like she doesn’t think Young Slim would take Big Slim having sex with the hairy guy too well. I don’t see why.” He noticed Scott’s expression. “Okay, I completely see why. But is it really the end of the world if the kid finds out that he’s gonna grow up to have a thing for beer-swilling slobs that he thinks kill people for money…? Don’t answer that.”

“Kitty sounds pissed.” Scott smoothed down his wispy costume and ran a hand through his hair, looking annoyingly tidy and not at all as if he’d just had sweaty sex over a desk. “And she has every right to be. Our behavior was inexcusably irresponsible – although possibly just a normal morning in this place given the way you and Ororo probably carry on. Of course, I would never have behaved like that in my school where young people under my care might be traumatized….”

“You sanctimonious lying jackass, Cyke! You and Frost were at it like rabbits every time you had five minutes off! Rendition to paradise island, death by Kitty Pryde, me smacking you for that crack about my school, or getting your hands on Poseidon’s mighty trident? Your choice?”

Scott said, “Aikaterine’s going to make me have sex with sea nymphs, I know it. That girl is ruthless.”

“Not as ruthless as our Kitty is in defense of Teen Slim and his unsullied virgin mind. Trust me.”

Kitty added quietly but perfectly audibly through the keyhole. “It would be such a shame if this baseball bat I’m carrying accidentally got phased through you and then solidified in your colon, Logan. And, as for you, Scott, when I come in there I’m going to….”

Scott and Logan both winced at her whispered threat. Scott hastily threw the stapler out of the open window as a safety precaution. As the air was whipped to a whirlpool outside and the grass flattened and rippled abjectly before it, Scott blanched. “Is that Storm? You and Storm broke up, right? Please tell me you and Storm broke up? If she caught me fishing in her waters she’d…. No, wait, it’s just a ‘Stark Industries’ helicopter touching down. Any chance Krakoa might eat it?”
“Nah. Krak likes Stark. He brings him marshmallows. And Ro and I ain’t exclusive so she probably won’t wanna kill ya any more than she usually does – although maybe keep out of her way for a few days, just to be on the safe side….”

Logan’s phone made another texting noise and he snatched it up irritably then blanched himself. “Shit! I forgot about Rachel. She’s really pissed.” He held out the phone so Scott could read that furious text from his other-dimensional daughter.

**Logan, you worthless ****er How dare you **** my father like that! I am going to ******* you with a ****ing elephant *****! You ********!**

“She’s usually more articulate than that. She has clearly been hanging around you too long.” Scott glanced back out of the window. “Men in white coats with a stretcher and what looks like some kind of tranquilizer gun are getting out of the helicopter.”

“Open this door or I am phasing through it in five seconds whether you two are wearing clothes or not!” Kitty hissed. “One – two –”

“We need to leave.” Logan grabbed Scott’s arm. “Fire up the portal now!”

They were only just in time. Kitty had realized the door was unlocked and opened it just as they backed into the portal, and they had a good view of her angry face, the baseball bat she was carrying – she had also brought her own stapler – and, behind her, a furious Rachel, the hound marks livid on her face, carrying something that was gray, wrinkled, and exceedingly large, and, panting along the corridor behind Rachel, the white-coated attendants with their restraint-festooned stretcher.

“Who knew you could get a stuffed elephant ***** at such short notice?” Logan said, impressed despite himself.

Scott called back pacifyingly to Rachel, “Sweetheart, I liked what Logan did to me, I swear. And I’m sorry about the noise, Kitty, but it was mostly Logan’s fault. You should really think about moving the kids to the New Xavier School. We never have sex in the offices there. We care about the young minds we’re shaping.”

“Slim, I swear to God, one more crack about my school and I am gonna shove that baseball bat of Kitty’s…..”

Kitty said, “Get back here so I can kill you, Scott Summers! And, as for you, Logan…!”

“Sorry, Kitty! Sea nymphs to see – tridents to steal,” Scott said hastily, and then the swirly blue portal whooshed them tumultuously through the gateways between the worlds and then spilled them onto the white marble floor of a classical Hellenic palace and into the next excitingly impossible Labor of Hercules.

*End*

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