Shorelines

by OberonsEarring

Summary

A many chaptered story that takes place after the defeat of Osborne on Utopia. Though mutant survival and Osborne's revenge play havoc on the Utopian leader's mind, Logan decides to make a play for Cyclops anyway. Thus begins a story of romance, lust, and adventure as both X-men - and the rest of the mutant race - try to navigate this often harrowing world.
Part I

Chapter Notes

This is a long story, more chapters to come - but, hopefully worth it in the end.

Comments appreciated. ***(If you're just in for that certain thrill, there's a piece just posted in chapter XXXIV/ 34, 41,44, 62, 67 - Yes, I warned about a long story.)

I stand there like a pup who'd gotten full of himself and attacked a fucking lion. Cupping his balls. Yeah, that's right. That's what I'm doin'. I grabbed his balls hopin' that he finally shows me what I'm pretty damn sure is rollin' around his head, but he ain't got the guts to say. A sick smirk on my face, I crane my neck to look up at him, see what kind of reaction I finally got out of this smug mother fucker. Nothin. He just stands there, asshole mouth o’ his blank as ever, jaw clenched the same as ever, ruby quartz visor the same as ever. Not one flinch, not one show of fear, lust, or anything other than nothin'.

“You're going to neuter me?” he asks long after silence has become discomfort; his baritone as deadpan as his face.

Scott Summers is stubborn, but so am I. “Nah. I ain't that merciful.” A grin snakes across the right side of my face and I give his balls a little squeeze. Damn giraffe still doesn't react.

I don't how long we just stand there, me lookin' up and him lookin' down, locked into this antler-bashing challenge neither of us is willing to back down from. But, I remember the moment I run my thumb just up towards the base of his shaft, and the involuntary dip of his Adam's apple - the only reaction I've gotten out of him since I locked him in the Danger Room.

I take a step forward, hand still in place, my thumb daring to stroke his manhood once again. I smile, crane my neck further, waiting to see the facade of calmness crack. It doesn't.

“Logan,” he says evenly, “Step back.”

Freud's a fucking genius. He doesn't say hands off, doesn't tell me not to touch his junk, he says step back. I can feel the laughter build in the back of my throat, just as an eye beam sends me flying across the Danger Room. He stands there, against the wall, his face still as stoic as ever. “Let me out,” he says coolly.

“No,” I reply.

“Let me out of here, Logan,” he demands again.

“Make me,” I dare. His response is another eye beam right to the chest. He's goin' easy on me. I've seen what he can do, and this ain't nowhere near. I get back on my feet and he hits me with another one. Breath knocked out, I grab my chest and scowl so he knows I'm pissed. Low power or not, these damn things hurt. “Damn it, Summers,” I curse under my breath, take a step forward, and he smacks me again. Though his face don't show it, I know he's doin' this on purpose, showin' his Alpha, provin' to me why he's in charge.

Anger builds quickly as another beam crashes into my right knee. Then another to my left shoulder.
Another to my forehead. All low power, just enough to knock me back, piss me off. Fuel for the fire, and that fire blazes high after another five fucking shots pin me to the wall. I curse and growl only to be hit by another, and my blood starts to boil. My skin burns hot, my mind becomes a single focus when I’m smacked down by yet another of those stupid ass beams, and I have no choice but to give into the callin' in my blood. Not the animal. No, it's worse than that. It's revenge. Years of listening to that asshole tell me what to do, of staring down at me with that blank expression on his face, refusin' to act like a fucking human being. Years of aggression come flooding out in a single moment, and with it comes a fierce growl deep within my chest.

I race across the Danger Room, claws out, ready for him to unleash another eye beam and send me flying back against the wall. I can feel my heart pound, my blood flow like lava, my every sense attuned to the man standing against the wall, his face still a fucking blank slate. I run, I rush, I speed, the growl in my throat building into a primal yell. I draw back my arm in my approach, ready to rip him apart with my claws...

But, the asshole just stands there, same place, same expression, one clawed hand just inches from his throat, the other plunged into the wall beside him. He called my bluff. “Fuck you, Summers.”

“What do you want, Logan?” he asks evenly.

“Nothing.”

“Then let me out.”

“No.”

“Then tell me what you want.” An unemotional bargain, or so he wants me to think.

Inches away from his chest, the pounding of his heart betrays him. Though his face is blank, the blood pumping through his veins is fast, uncontrolled. He swallows again. He smells like... like aftershave and coffee, like he'd stayed awake all night again, plotting and planning our survival. He continues to look down at me, reiterating the challenge, and I lessen the distance between us. He exhales and refuses to move. But, I won't back down, not now that I know. I was right. He does want me, just like I want him.

Slowly, eyes up, staring at ruby red lens, I place my hand upon his chest, right over his heart. His heart jolts with the movement. He sucks in a quiet breath that I wouldn't have heard had I not been so close. I slide my hand down inch by inch, keeping my eyes on his perfectly still face. Down, down the ripples of his abdomen, the slick fabric of his uniform, feeling the breath trapped inside. My hand twists as it drops lower and lower, until finally, it centers over his increasingly excited length. Bingo.

His breath hitches as my fingers find him through the stretched fabric, but his face doesn't move.

I sheathe the claws still stuck in the wall, use that hand to reach up along his spine and finding the zipper to his sleek blue armor. Again, he swallows as I begin to draw the zipper down, revealing the muscled flesh of shoulders. His body stiffens with awareness as I peel the uniform from his shoulders, slowly revealing the beautiful, pale skin beneath. I wonder if he’s going to bolt, attack, or let me keep undressing him.

“Logan-” he starts - a faint whiff of earth-struck vanilla - the first sign of his steel facade cracking as I splay my hand across his now naked chest. I find delight in this - the sound and floral scent of his jagged breath, the way his brow begins to crease ever so slightly. I tread my rough fingers over the many scars that he's endured, exploring them one by one, with fingers, with tongue, with a soft press of lips. The gun shot wound at his shoulder, round and pink, hardened with a callous. The blade wound that runs along his ribs, a long slice of barely-there white skin. The wounds from the surgery
when I cut a bomb out of him, the remnants puffed and hard, a glaring memory of how much pain this man has taken.

With one hand, I peel away his layer, with the other I explore the reminders of what he's fought so hard for his entire life. “Please,” he says quietly, his voice saturated with guilt and need, fear and want.

I shake my head, placing a gentle kiss over a recent wound, still scabbed and sensitive. He audibly inhales, his head leaning back just slightly. “You're too tall, Summers,” I remark and place a hand upon his shoulder to gently push him down to the floor. He meets me with reluctance, so I skim rough fingers across his nipple in a small, soft circle, and watch his facade break further. His brow knits, his lips part. His breath is broken, heavy thick sweet jungle. I smile, and again coax him down to the floor. In a daze, he meets my gentle command.

Against the wall, he leans, his knees bent, hands pressed hard into the floor. He's ready to run, ready to recall himself, his pride, his stoicism, so I don't let up. Kneeling between his long, lean legs, I smooth grizzled hands across his shoulders, keeping one in place to hold him down, to let him know that he's mine right now. And the other tickles upwards, a feather up his neck to just behind his ear. His brow creases even more with desire. Stern lips forget to close. His breath jumps, quiet reminders of how I'm effecting him, but I still want more. I want to see it, all of it, on his face, the breaking down of hardened steel and indifference.

“Close your eyes,” I husk, and slowly begin to remove the last of his facade.

Wrong move. An iron grip grabs my wrist, and within seconds, I'm lying on the floor, my arm nearly ripped from the joint. He stands over top of me, pulling the uniform back over his shoulders. With still shaky finger, he pushes his visor back into place. He takes the controls from my belt, ends the program, and without a word, he walks away.
Chapter Summary

So, what does Emma Frost think about this?

Chapter Notes

**A long story, more to come. Hopefully, worth the wait.

Summers is good at avoiding things. It's a long running joke about his mutant powers, his ability to repress and ignore anything that doesn't prove a boon or bane to mutant kind. He sits at the head of the table, a dozen screens flashing news items, surrounded by those who look to him for leadership. Emma sits to his right, Rogue to his left. Bobby, Namor, even Ororo listen silently. We all look to him as he explains the latest Utopian crisis and how he plans to leads us through it. We accept his orders with the same resolve that he wears upon his face – a long, cold line; determined, and fierce.

I approach him after our dismissal. His face remains still. “Thought we could grab a beer and --”

“You have your orders,” he commands, and turns to face a screen showing the energy system across the island. Typing at a keypad, he now speaks with Madison Jeffries about instituting rolling blackouts until the island-wide energy crisis can be solved. He no longer considers my presence.

Emma Frost waits for me at the door. I can see it in her eyes. She knows what I did. She beckons me with a wave of her hand and a strange glint in her eye.

I respect Emma, but I'm not Scott. I don't trust her. Yeah, she's done a lot for us, but she also did a lot against us. That, and I can smell her 'far too many secrets' a mile away. I figure she's goin’ to let me have it for making a move on her guy, but I don't care. It ain't like she didn't do the same with Scott when Jeannie was still alive. 'Course, I ain't much better in that department, so she should know better.

Emma leads me through the hallways, up the stairs, and to the door of the room she shares with Summers. I ain't been in this room, haven't wanted to be. When Scott shared a room with Jean, the room was pristine and organized. Shelves with books, drawers with clothes. Muted colors of green and yellow – the colors Jeannie liked 'cause Summers only sees red. There was a table beside the window where I imagined Scott and Jean having tea in the mornings. But this room? I can already imagine the whips and chains, handcuffs and gags. This room makes me nauseous, if only because it reminds me of what they did to Jean, how this witch tore them both apart.

Elegant fingers type a code on the passlock, and the door opens. Shock hits me hard, and she smiles. “You expected a dungeon?” she quips, and leads me inside the near white chamber.

A bed sits center against the wall, made up properly in military style. A loveseat, a table, chairs. A closet and drawers, soft white carpeting. All white, or shades of white, with bits and pieces of color here and there. It's a noble room, expensive, and clean. Not a hint of what I thought they were up to
“A dominatrix? I've evolved far beyond that,” she teases with a grin. She moves weightlessly into the small kitchen area, putting water on the stove for tea. “You were projecting,” she eases when my distrust of her and her head games shows on my face. “Go ahead. Take a seat. Anywhere you like.”

“What are you up to, Emma?”

Her velvet voice swirls across the room. “I should ask you the same thing.”

I settle onto a far chair in the corner watching curiously as she dallies in the kitchen. Like Summers and his never-ending stoicism, Emma is just as impossible to read. One part danger, one part coy, she stares at me out of the corner of her eyes. “You were in his head,” I finally state as she begins to pour the water into cups.

“I'm always in his head,” she reminds me with a wink, “Unless I'm not.” A pause as she pours hot water into the cups. “Sugar?” She exaggerates the disappointment when I shake my head, lip pulled out, kitten eyes. “You don't like sweet things?” A knowing smile etches across faux sadness. “Well, that's a shame.”

Her steps across the room are measured and even, a deer walking across a meadow. She places my tea on the small table beside me, turns on white high heel, and takes a seat on the edge of the bed. She crosses her legs, back straight, eyes curious. She takes a sip of tea and stares at the empty white wall ahead of her.

“Did I ever tell you about the first time I met Jean and Scott?” she asks all too politely.

“When you put us all in cages and turned Jean into a sun eating monster?” I still haven't forgiven her for that. I'm surprised that Scott has.

Softly, she shakes her head, platinum hair betraying her movement. She closes her eyes. “It was before that. How do you think Hellfire even knew about Jean?”

I sit back, interested, skeptical, and sip my tea.

“A dungeon,” she purred, sitting on the edge of the bar stool, her eyes dancing with delight at the possibilities. “That could be fun.” Twisting to the side, she curled her arm around his, pulling him close to her. “What do you think?” “Whatever you need,” he replied quietly, his focus still upon the floor, unwilling to look up even for a second at the dancers beckoning him from the stage.

“Let's do it,” she exhaled, biting her plump lower lip.

“Okay,” he whispered, his shame and guilt more than palpable behind thick red lenses.

**Down the hallway they followed, nightmare opposites of each other. She was bubbly and bright, excited and free; he was silent and morose, reluctant and ashamed. He had come to realize that he wasn't enough for her, for the power that boiled over in the middle of the night, that no matter what he did or tried, that she still felt him lacking. He was willing to do anything for her, even if it meant what he feared the worst: getting ripped to shreds by the beast within her.**

“Dominating is an art form,” I explained quietly as the dancers began to undress them. While she was uninhibited, Scott remained shy, attempting to keep his clothes. “It's not merely about the pleasure of power,” I warned her, “and it's not just about pain. It's about balancing pleasure and pain, for both of you.”
After several disapproving looks from Jean, Scott finally relented and let the dancers take his clothes. First the jacket, then the shirt, after some fuss his shoes and socks. More fuss, and a cold reminder from Jean about her needs, and away went his pants, and finally his underwear. He stood naked among us, unaware of how beautiful he was, of how we all found ourselves lost in lustful thoughts at the sight of his nudity.

“Wow,” I whispered to Jean, “You did well.” She smiled, nodded in agreement.

“He'll need a blindfold,” she reminded the dancers of her lover’s still shielded eyes. The dancers obliged, taking away his red glasses and replacing them with tightly wrapped white silk. They led him to the bed, laid him down, and chained his arms and legs to the bed posts. He braced himself for pain.

Jean’s eyes glittered over the various toys – the hooks and claws, feathers and ribbons, spikes and needles. Her hand immediately grabbed for the whip, but I cautioned her with a click of my tongue. “So soon?” I cautioned her coyly, and guided her eyes back to the smaller toys. I picked out a single claw midst the rows – darkest black inlaid with a golden cherry tree. “Simple,” I explained, “but when used properly, highly effective.”

I grabbed her hand and brought her to the bed where Scott lay prone to our machinations. He took a deep breath as my weight settled beside him. A shiver down his frame, tensing and contracting the sculpted muscles one by one, like a spring rain that came and went without warning. “Are you cold?” I breathed, slipping the claw over my right index finger. Jean watched, fascinated as I leaned in to cascade the warmth of my breath over his chest.

“No.”

I placed the tip of claw right below his neck, pressed it against the tender skin between his collar bones. “Are you cold?” I asked again with threat of pain. A warm cloud upon his nipple, and I could hear the quiet sounds of his breath.

“No.”

> Enjoying that he would be far harder to break than I imagined, I pressed the tip of the claw into his skin bringing the first droplet of blood to the surface. Jean growled in delight. He remained still, his face and body unmoved by the awareness of pain. “Are you cold?” Grinning, I forced the claw deeper, the dip in his skin filling with blood, and slowly, like the tip of an artist’s brush, I drug the claw down his chest, just hard enough to break the skin, watching as he fought recognition of the pain. “Are you cold?” More pressure, more pain, as I etched the claw lower down his abdomen. “Are you cold?” The claw threatened to go lower still, hinging at that one part all men protect.

“Yes.”

“Good boy,” I laughed and bent low, my tongue gently caressing the small red canvas I’d just created. His breath hitched, and the first sign of life from his rather prominent member. With that, I handed the claw to Jean and left the room. They left an hour later, Jean more confident, Scott more ashamed. The dancers told me later that night of all the blood they had to clean up.

“Jean had a little kink. What do I care?” I ask, coldly, assuring her that I don't want to hear this. Emma’s been tryin’ to defame Jean for years, and usin’ Scotty-boy to do it, well... Her eyes dare me to consider the story again. “Summers is a stubborn ass. If he was really against it, he would have said no.”

“Would he?” she invites. “Could Scott Summers truly have said no to Phoenix?”
“He loved her.” I dread the words as they fall out of my mouth.

“He did. Very much so. He was doing everything he could to keep her together, to keep her human. If she needed pillow soft love, he gave her pillow soft love. If she needed violence, he let her have her violence. Better him than someone else. At least he could take it.”

I roll my eyes at the thought and pop my claws. “Some little kitten claw ain't violence, queenie.”

“No. That wasn't the violence. Marking up his body like an interstate road map was just the beginning. Cutting him, bruising him, burning him – all just escalation. The worst was a few months down the road, before Wyngarde finally decided that Jean was something worth keeping.”

I'd steered her away from the dungeon for months. While she reveled in her exuberance for the experiences, these same experiences haunted Scott. He was increasingly more withdrawn as her demands became more painful. But, after months, I grew tired of flitting her this way and that, and caved to her request for the dungeon. More than once, as we walked down the darkened hall, I felt her telepathically nudge him to keep walking forward. Her anger boiled with each step he refused to take.

As we entered the room, and he looked upon the chains hanging from the ceiling, the different whips and barbs available, I could see his shoulders tremble with fear. “Jean,” he said, “the other rooms are fine, don't you think?”

She pressed into him, her hands splayed across his chest, her eyes pleading. “I need this, Scott. Please, please. If I don't...” Tears fell down her cheeks. I couldn't tell if they were fake or not. Her pleading continued. “Please. My dreams, Scott. This is the only way. This is the only thing -”

“I know,” he whispered, placing a gentle hand on the back of her head, pulling her into him. He stroked the flame-kissed flow of her hair, and placed a gentle kiss on the top of her head. In that moment, I could feel how much he loved her, how worried he was about her, and once again, that he would do anything for her. But, I could also feel his unwillingness. Whether he couldn't or wouldn't express it, I couldn't tell.

The dancers came and removed his clothing, revealing a network of shallow cuts across his body. From the nape of his neck to the bottom of his feet, his whole body was interlaced with the fine web of her need. They wouldn't scar, as shallow as they were, but there was pain involved. As always, they removed his glasses, tied his eyes tight with cloth, while Jean donned the black leather corset she'd become so fond of.

>A demon's grin as the dancers stretched out Scott's arms, binding him at the wrists with dull metal cuffs, and then did the same for his feet. Across the room, a lever was pulled, and Scott was hoisted several inches up off the grown, his arms and legs painfully pulled in either direction. Jean stalked a close circle around her spread eagle lover, achingly held in place by taut chains. The first snap of the whip caught me off guard, hitting the burnished concrete floor with a bang. Her cruel laugh echoed off the walls. “Do you love me?” she asked cruelly.

>“Yes,” he replied quietly.

“Liar!” she screamed and sent the barbed end of her whip across his muscular frame.

The dancers looked at me, scared as the barbs ripped through his skin, spilling out blood on the very first strike. I shook my head and motioned for the door. We escaped just as the second strike hit, the very same question on her lips.
“You're not going to leave him in there with her, are you?” one of the dancers finally broke the silence in the hallway. The other dancers nodded in agreement. “She nearly suffocated him last night.”

Another dancer spoke up. “If we hadn’t walked in when we did... Ms. Frost, she's crazy strong, and I swear she’s making him do this.”

Finally, the third dancer gained her courage. “I could hear her laugh in my head when we got him ready. She’s... She’s gonna...”

Though I shared their concern, there was little I could do. This was the Hellfire Club. Nothing was too dark, too shameful, and since he'd given consent, my hands were tied. “You should know better than to get attached to your clients, girls.”

>As always, the girls remained in the hallway, waiting to serve if needed. I returned to the bar, got a stiff drink, and hoped that their fears would be unfounded. An hour later, I only proved to the girls what a fool I was.

I could hear the cries as I rushed down the hallway. Desperate pleas of stop, please, Jean. His voice cracked as it echoed, louder and louder. “Stand behind me, girls,” I warned as I jammed the key into the lock. I twisted and turned the knob, but I couldn't get inside.

A dark laugh poured out over us, chilling our spines and thoughts. “They think they can save you, Scott!” An anguished sob followed.

“Go get Shaw and Leland,” I ordered the dancers as I continued to try and break in. The silence that followed scared me bloodless. Telepathically, I reached out beyond the door, feeling the madness within the confines of the room. She was pacing back and forth, her lips drawn up into a snarl as she looked through the toys, wondering which would bring the pain that would sate her hunger at last. In the darkness, still strung up by chains, I could see blood glisten across his naked body, but that was all. So, I reached further with my mind, attempting to enter his consciousness, but instead of finding him there, I found her.

It took barely a thought for her to fling me across the hall. The next thing I remember is being woken by another round of screaming. Dazed from her attack, I stood on shaky legs just as Shaw and Leland arrived. “She's telekinetic, telepathic, very strong. She's keeping the door shut.”

Shaw and Leland both tried their hand at the door, but both proved unsuccessful.

Scott's voice broke through the walls again, so pained that even Leland was unnerved. “She's killing him,” I explained. “Murder's against the rules.”

Without a second thought, Leland turned and punched Shaw in the face. The dancers would have screamed at the continued assault, but I immediately soothed their minds, kept them calm and in control. I filled their minds with instructions, keeping them on track. “Find an empty room, clean it top to bottom. Get clean water, medical kits. Go.” The girls rushed off as Leland finally wore himself out. Shaw stood up, his face a bloody mess, his mind filled with rage. With a roar, he pounded himself into the door, shattering it to pieces.

The impact, however, did not surprise Jean. She stood in front of her lover's suspended figure licking and kissing at the still bleeding wounds. Her fingers wrapped around his swollen length, teasing and curling around him to keep him hard and humiliated. Her hands twisted the spikes that she'd shoved into his fingers, pressed against the small darts she'd impaled into his chest and abdomen. Coiling the wire she'd placed around his neck even tighter. She traced blood soaked fingers around his body,
glancing over the markings of whips and spikes across his back. “I’m an artist,” she mused, lost to madness, lost to the power that erupted from within her like flames.

“We don’t allow murder here,” Shaw explained.

Jean shrugged, running a cattail whip down Scott's back towards his buttocks. “This is what he wants.” She traced the reddened, bleeding skin of his bottom with the smooth edge of the whip before reeling back her arm and striking him again. The force ripped into already torn flesh. “This is what I want.”

As I watched her delight in the fresh rush of blood from Scott's shivering body, I prepared my mental guards. In ecstasy, she ran her hands over his fresh-cut flesh, eliciting a tired, pained moan. She reached her hand around his waist, wrapping bloody fingers around his continued erection. A deep laugh poured across the room as she licked the fresh blood from his wounds and continued to stroke his length. “Pain and pleasure. See?” she said in faux innocence. “He loves it.”

“Ms. Grey,” I hushed, “we're asking you to leave the premises.”

The backlash was by far stronger than I expected – a mix of telepathy and telekinesis – she threw me through the air, back into the wall of whips and blades. Shaw rushed her shortly after, only to suffer the same fate. Again, she flexed her wrist, sending the whip careening against Scott's bare thighs. Cuts multiplied; his body shook; spikes fell loose from his back and shoulders, his calves and feet, spilling out onto the floor. Dismayed she looked at her tarnished handiwork, and struck him again across the thighs. Through blood loss and pain, he barely whimpered.

Jean looked at Leland, her green eyes spinning mischief. “Well, big man,” she purred. “Let's see what you've got.”

“I'd rather not,” he feigned, and in my daze, I picked up on his thoughts. In a matter of moments, I was on my feet, scrambling out of the room. Even at the end of the hallway, I could hear Jean's dark cackle.

As I ran down the stairs, I heard the crashing of continued battle. At times, the whole building seemed to shake for her insanity, but I continued running. I raced through the lower hallway, fumbled for my keys, when I heard Jean's madness yet again. Be it Scott, Shaw, or Leland, I couldn't tell, I only know that the scream was blood curdling and frightened.

I reached out to connect to Leland's mind. His thoughts were dizzy, pale, nowhere near as lubricious as they usually were. “I'm here,” I told him as I entered the room below. Another round of crushing battle overhead. Jean's frenzy increased. Lights flickered, walls shook.

Wyngarde's sleazy voice came next, a loquacious diatribe of whatever, and then a momentary silence before the ceiling began to creak above me. I pulled the mattress off the bed, tried to find the center of the noise. Fighting continued, the ceiling began to crack, and in moments, broke altogether. Scott Summers fell upon the mattress, the chains so heavy that they broke his wrists and ankles.

As things continued above, I looked at what she had done. Whip-bitten skin bled from head to toe, the spikes impaled under fingernails and in the soles of his feet, a dagger wound into his chest bone. Flayed skin along his ribs, deep, bleeding wounds along his arms and legs. I could see the bloody imprint of her lips on his cheeks, on the blind fold, her fingerprints burned into his thighs, her teethmarks on his length. His breath was shallow, the pain immense, but more than that - in his thoughts - the anguish of his heart, as he hadn't been able to help her. He wasn't strong enough to be what she needed. He loved her more than anything, but that love was constantly failing her. She'd
broken him, in more ways than one, and she also showed Wyngarde the keys to breaking her as well.

“He didn't wake up for a nearly a week,” Emma explains. “In that time, Jean had come back to herself, ashamed of what she'd done to him, and erased his memories of it.”

“If he doesn't remember, then -”

“You, more than anyone should know that erasing a memory doesn't erase the experience. His body still remembered the pain. His mind still remembered the fear, the doubt, the misery. He felt everything, he just didn't know why. Even after her resurrection... Jean tortured him like that for years, erasing the memories, but the feelings remained. It was sad, really. She convinced him that he was just insecure, that he was crazy, that he wasn't fit to lead anymore. And, then Apocalypse unveiled the truth, showed him what had been hiding behind all those erased memories. Scott didn't know whether to believe it or not. Jean told him the memories were fake, but his heart told him that they were real.”

“Come here, Scott,” I soothed, but he remained in the darkened corner of my mind vault, staring at the odd surroundings, afraid to come closer. “You're safe, Scott. She can't come in here.”

“She'll find a way,” he replied, face blank, staring ahead at the empty chair across from me.

I realized that he was not going to budge. He didn't trust me. He had no reason to trust me. “She hurt you.”

“I have to go, Emma.” But, in my mind, I was stronger than him. I didn't let him leave. Fear washed over him, not his face, not his body, but his thoughts. “Fire,” he said, using the safe word I created for him, a word that he could say and he could leave. It was how I'd gotten him here, the only reason why he'd agreed to come. A single word, and he would be released.

I smiled patiently. “This isn't fire, Scott. This is a large white room with a single darkened corner that you have chosen to stand in. This isn't pain. This isn't betrayal. This isn't anything other than a large, white room.”

“I'm not crazy.” His voice hid well the heartache underneath his calm composure.

“No, you're not.” The tiniest bit of tension receded from his shoulders. “For months now, Jean and Xavier have been telling you that these thoughts are the remnants of Apocalypse, but they're not, Scott. Monster that he is, he showed you the truth.”

Scott swallowed as the acknowledgment of the betrayal began to crack his steeled features. His teeth clenched, head bowed, fists tightened. “It's okay to yell, Scott. In here, it's okay to do anything,” but the coaxing did little more than force him back inside of himself. Silence. He steeled himself to me; his thoughts becoming a list of errands and missions and Danger Room sessions. “Fire?” I asked. He shook his head silently, and I let him go.

A guttural laugh spills forth. “You almost had me going there, queenie. You didn't crawl through his mind to help him, your sole purpose was to bust up their marriage -”

“That mirage of a marriage? Hell, yes, I meant to break it up. Someone had to! She was a cosmic monster...” She takes a deep breath to calm herself down, the tell-tale flicker of diamond fading before it could harden completely. “Do you know many times she lorded you over his head?”

“Don't try to put the blame on me. Jean caught you -”
“In something she misunderstood,” Emma breathes, her eyes sparking patience. “He was curious, Logan. Even she came to see that. Curiosity. That's all it was. It wasn't lust, it wasn't need, he simply wanted to know if he would ever be able to touch someone again and not drown in the miasma of it all. Of course, as you're well aware, Jean caught us, we never found out.”

“Then you shacked up with him -”

She shakes her head, a wistful sigh. I raise my brow. “We kiss, which is enjoyable. I'd kiss him more if he'd let me. Sometimes, I can even get him to sleep beside me. But, he's not really all that interested in me. A body only money can buy, and he prefers a science experiment gone wrong.”

I finish my now-cold tea in a single gulp. Her eyes follow my thoughts. I still doubt her, still have this lingering feeling that she ain't tellin' me somethin’. “Sounds like he's quite a burden.”

“For me or for you?” She sucks in a sharp breath, rolls her blue eyes to the ceiling, then returns to me with a silver gaze. “You frightened him yesterday, Logan.”

“Yeah, I figured that.”

“Not because you threatened to cut his dick off,” she chuckles, “but because you got close. He wants to run, to shut you out. It's up to you if you let him.” She stretches out languorously on the bed, her arms reaching towards far away pillows. She's a beautiful woman, thick in all the right places, smarter than most geniuses, and with a penchant for cruelty that can only intrigue a man's soul.
III

Chapter Summary

A beer with Kurt.

Chapter Notes

It's a slow story, but hopefully worth it in the end - more chapters to come.

Eight hours later, I finish my patrol around the island, checking all the usual spots for signs of trouble. “Wolverine on all clear,” I say into my com, “Permission to check out for the night, Cyke?”

“Thank you, Wolverine,” Scott replies from the other end, his insistence on code names while on duty still paramount, though I don't know why we bother. By now, the whole world knows his name, and the world has known mine for a long time. “Permission granted.” No hint of what took place the day before, just cold, hard leadership. Which is a shame, even a held breath woulda been nice.

I wander back into the building, through the halls, and into the Common Room kitchen alcove where a case of cold beer and a roast beef sandwich is waiting for me. The note says, Love, Emma. I'm not sure what I make of it, but I'm tired, hungry, grouchy, and rather than pop my claws into the nearest electric appliance, I take what I'm given.

I grab two beers and the sandwich, and make my way onto the old white table the kids use for card playin'. The first beer goes down smooth, and I bite wholeheartedly into Emma's little gift.

I still wonder what she's playing at with all this. Yeah, Scott's fucking fine, but if that shit's true, then that's a lot of fucking garbage to pile on top of fine, and I'm not sure it's entirely worth it. If it's not true, then I seriously got to start arguin' against Emma's presence here.

I smell Kurt long before I see him. Kurt opens the fridge, grabs one o' my beers, and settles down at the table. “Those are mine,” I tell him, and get a wide smile in return.

“You are troubled, mein fruend,” he says after his first long gulp.

“When am I not?”

“Since coming here, to this Utopia, never.”

I watch his face twist further with concern. “You talkin' about me or you, Elf?”

“You, of course,” he grins sadly. “Me? I have my chapel. Even Emma Frost comes to see me now.”

The way he says her name, as if hopeful for her redemption, perks my interest. “Does she actually pray?”

He laughs. “No, but she comes to see the progress. I cannot ask for anything more.” We take another
swig of our beers in silence. “So, what troubles you, Logan?”

“Jean,” I finally manage to mouth. He nods, ever understanding. We've had this conversation a million times, about her death, about how I killed her. He once called it survivor's guilt, but tonight, I don't think he will. He searches me with his inquisitive yellow eyes. “Jean and Scott. That's what troubles me.”

He waits with the patience of an angel as I struggle through my words, the smile on his face soft. Two bamfs later, and he puts another two beers in front of me.

“Do you think she could have... In all the time that we knew them, do you think she would have... Ah, never mind.” I push myself back into my chair, leaning it up on two legs. Another beer popped and gulped.

Kurt mimics my movements, his way of creating a connection. I don't know if it's the instincts of the circus, or the patience of the priest. He swigs the beer down, disappears, and grabs himself another. “He loved her. Even with the way things ended between them, he loved her. Though others doubt him, I do not.”

“And, she loved him.”

Kurt nods. “Yes, she loved him. Emma does, too, in her own way. I will say, though, it's nice to see him a little more relaxed.”

“Relaxed?” I guffaw. “When has One-eye ever been relaxed?”

A wide smile breaks across midnight blue, showing rows of sharp white teeth. “Even in the midst of building this haven, he's not nearly on edge as I've seen him in the past. Maybe relaxed is the wrong word. Less... tortured? He's changed. It's nice to see. For a long time, I didn't think him capable.”

The conversation passes into laughter as Kurt recalls his latest round of practical jokes which included bamfing into the San Francisco's public restrooms and leaving. Beers flow, hours wane, and Kurt draws agile blue hands above his head in a purposeful stretch. “I am sorry to leave you, mein freund,” he issues through a gaping yawn, “But, I must. The flock will need tending tomorrow.”

“Night, Elf,” I say with a smile and nod, and bamf, Kurt disappears.

Not even close to being buzzed, I take another two beers and wander through the halls, bored and restless. Too many thoughts swarmin’ around my head to put them down just yet. I end up at the War Room, it's multiple screens still alive and kicking. I mutter something about rolling blackouts, and start to step away, when I see the tip of shoe out of the corner of my eye.

Peeking around the doorway, I catch a sight few will ever behold in this life. Scott Summers asleep. Head tilted back against the wall, braced on the side by the door frame, hands motionless on the armrests, as if all the energy drained from his body all at once. Granted, it probably did. Rumor has it that he hasn't slept in three nights leaving the X-Club all kindsa worried about his decision making processes, but here he is dead to the world.

Quietly, I enter, leaving my beers on the giant table in the center, then turn to look at him. He's not peaceful, but after everything I know he's been through - and the stuff I'm now not so sure about - I'm not sure he knows what peaceful is. I'm staring, I know. Stalker stuff, I know, but... It ain't often one can look at Scott Summers without his jaw all clenched up tight and an order rollin' off his tongue at the same time.

His breath is light and even, a far contrast to our encounter in the Danger Room. That heaviness,
reminding himself to breathe as my fingers played across his chest, the way he licked his lips as my hand trickled up his spine, the way they parted as I slicked the uniform off his shoulders. I remember what he looked like then. I want him to look like that now. I want to know what he tastes like, his lips, his tongue, his skin. I want to take away the masks he wears, the clothes he wears. I want to hear his breath, the low rumble of his throat.

You, more than anyone should know that erasing a memory doesn't erase the experience.

But not tonight. A knot in my throat, I push myself between his legs, and startled, Cyke's body comes to life. One hand shoots up towards his visor, the other ready to push himself out of the chair. I grab them both, one in the air, and the other pressed firmly into the armrest. The moments play out like eons as his determined face settles into confusion and he becomes aware of me. “S'okay, Slim. Just me.”

I can feel his body slowly leave battle-mode behind, watch as stoic reservation returns to his animated features. Brow smoothes, jaw clenches, lush lips become a lean long line of nothing. He swallows. “Can I let go?” I ask. He nods softly, unsure. Unsure of what I'm doing, unsure of what he wants. He swallows again.

His breath becomes more shallow as my hand gently, so gently, touches his stubbled jaw, tracing the strong line to the center of his chin. He stops his lip from trembling as my thumb strokes the hollow of his cheek. For a just a moment, he presses against my hand before retreating. Slowly, so not to force another eyebeam to my chest, I bend down and press my lips against his forehead. His brow creases, lips part with a hitched breath. “Good night, Slim,” I mouth into his hair, running my fingers back across his cheek. And without a word, I leave.
Chapter Summary

Locked in the Danger Room once again.

Chapter Notes

Yes, still more coming.

Yeah, I played it cool, and I'm regrettin' it. The way his skin heated up when I touched him, the scent of... Damn. Cold shower. Another cold shower. Television. Shower. Radio. Rolling blackout. Grrr.

I take it out on the washing machine in my bathroom. Yeah, they're a precious resource around here, but I don't care. A few minutes of slashing and bashing and that machine is toast. Not nearly enough.

Agitated as heck, trying to ignore the knot in my groin, I stomp through the quiet halls to the Danger Room. It's smaller than the one at the school, but still useful when tryin' to get your mind off o' things. Damn my luck, there's a session already in progress. This is one heckuva night.

With a heavy groan I begin pounding on the metal door. I don't care if it's Remy, Betsy, or fucking Drake, I'm getting in there and beatin' the shit outta somethin'. No answer, so I pound harder and harder, start yellin' at the top o' my lungs. “Open the damn door!”

Summers. Summers and his fucking asshole facade that doesn't show nothin' unless you grab him by the balls and squeeze. Sweaty already, scenario on pause, he stands just inside the doorway. “You'll wake everyone up,” he scolds.

“Good,” I reply and push my way inside, backing him up several steps into the room.

He tosses the controls towards me. “Four-twelve-B,” he says quietly, like I should know which scenario that is, and tries to leave. I manage to grab him before he gets too far. Ruby red visor looks down at me, unthreatened, in control, as blank as ever.

“Stay,” I tell him. He shakes his head just enough to show his discomfort and tries to step past me. I press a button, and lean back against the now shut door. “Stay,” I repeat, more forceful this time, and push him back further. “Logan's room,” I speak into the controls, and suddenly the battle he'd been engrossed in minutes earlier is wiped from existence. In its place, the simplicity of the metal room. Nothing. Just me and him. Just like before. He swallows.

“Is it true?” I ask as I slide down the door to the floor, my eyes quickly measuring the gap between us. Show him space, I figure, be non-threatening, maybe he won't run.

For long moments, he simply stares at me. I can't tell if he's thinking, unsure, or what. Fucking Summers. At long length, he crosses to the other side of the room and leans against the wall, arms crossed against the dark blue of his uniform. I can see the tension in his muscles, as if any movement...
I make, no matter how slight, is gonna earn me a beam to the face. 'Course, I can't blame him.
Second time in two days that I've locked him in here. “Is what true?” he finally asks, his voice deep
and plain.

“Jean,” I respond, ready for the hand to the visor, ready to jump, dodge and roll as he tries to shoot
the hell outta me, but he stays as icy as ever.

As the silence lags, his jaw flexes and he looks down to the floor. But, I give him no out. He knows
what I'm askin'. “Damn you, Emma,” he mumbles under his breath, and turns his head to the side, no
longer willing to look at me. His practiced stoicism kicks in, his face betraying too few of his
thoughts.

“Why didn't you say anything?” I ask, softer now.

“I didn't know.” He still can't bring himself to look at me.

“You did after Apocalypse.”

“Apocalypse said a lot of things.” His legs begin to shake as he recalls his time fighting off the
monster who tried to take over his mind. “Would you believe him?”

I wait, give him a chance to settle again. There's pain there, on his face, visible just below his visor
and in the corners of his mouth. “But, you believed him.” A solemn, small nod. “So, why not say
something now?”

His voice cracks as he speaks. Anger draws his dark brows low behind metal frame, clenches his
teeth together, squares his lips into a beast-like snarl. “Because she's dead, Logan,” he says with a
touch too much force, revealing the deep of guilt that he still feels.

Chest heaves with deep, heavy breaths as he pulls himself back together, rebuilding the facade. But,
the facade is still cracked, teeth still bared, head tilted up to something in the ceiling. He flinches,
twice, a twitch in his cheek as he seeks to reset himself. Silence.

Lifetimes pass once again, his face tightens as he scours memories that he's unsure what to do with.
“Let me out, Logan.” His voice hoarse, scratched from the feelings clawing their way through his
throat.

“No.”

He swallows, gloved hands tense over elbows. The silence grows more dangerous as he ponders the
room around him and the guard caging him. When he finally returns his gaze to me, his rage is calm,
smooth, death behind ruby red. Were he anyone else, I'd fear for my life. The long line of his mouth,
the clenched jaw, arms stiff across his chest, the room fills with the scent of his rage – dark, earthy, a
poison that streaks through blood. “Let me out,” he speaks again, his voice composed, a building fire
behind a wall of steel.

“No,” I repeat, stronger, more adamant, brace myself to defend, but...

I'm surprised, then, that he just gives up, but then I remember how little he's slept since he brought us
here. How little time he's had to rest, to be like the rest of us. His body slowly slides down the wall,
arms wrap around his knees, head collapses forward, the weight of memories finally crashing down
upon him. A long and anxious silence.

“Scotty?” I ask after some time.
“Hmm,” he mumbles, too weary, too broken to respond.

“Seein' if you were awake.”

If he notices when I stand, he doesn't show it. If he hears my steps across the floor, he doesn't acknowledge them. If he feels me standing over top of him, looking down at his collapsed visage, he doesn't say. I sit beside him, hands draped over my knees, head back against the wall. I can hear the soft inhales and exhales as he controls the flow of breath through his lungs. Muscles tense in his fists and arms as he fights against whatever demon has risen from his nightmares, tryin' to force it back down into the depths of his memories.

He says nothing, explains nothing in between the pain that shudders against his soul, just the sound of his calm, steady breath and the shivering of muscles under his uniform. But, I don't expect him to. He ain't me. He doesn't just talk to people when the mood strikes. Hell, he doesn't even smile when the mood strikes, which is a shame. His face looks good when he smiles.

If he were Kurt, I'd drag him to the pub, get him fall-down drunk, and wait for the confessions to start pourin' out. If this were Megan, I'd pull her into a hug and just let her cry it out until she was ready to talk. Any of 'em, I'd know what to do, know what to say, but with Scott? People've been tryin' to reach him for years, ain't none successful.

“Sounds like he's quite a burden.”

“For me or for you?” The memory of conversation floats through my mind.

It's the only thing I can think of, to give him space but make him acknowledge that I'm here. I place my hand on his back, smooth at the stretched fabric around his shoulders. At first, I think he's goin' to allow it, but his years of shame kick back in too quickly. He tries to scramble away, long legs ready to push up off the ground, but I catch him before he gets far, grab his arm and pull him back down beside me. His face is red and angry. “Let me out,” he warns me his free hand reaching for his visor.

“No,” I say for a third time. “Blast me all you want, string bean, but you ain't goin' yet.”

He wants to hit me, I can tell that much from the way his body is tensed, but he doesn't. This ain't control, this is confusion. This is his mind trying to piece together a puzzle that's been building up between us for years – from the moment we first met to right now.

I twirl my fingers into his, pressing nails into his fabric-covered knuckles. Though I can't see his eyes behind the visor, I can tell he's watching. His breath becomes slower, heavier; the red of his anger blends with heated skin, more flushed against his cheekbones. With my free hand, I trace the outline of his fingers, how they interlock with mine, how they slide over top of my knuckles. His breath remains an even pace. He's not moving, not running, not slamming his fist in my face, or kicking me in the balls. These are good signs.

Slowly, so that he has time to see what I'm doing, I turn his hand over in mine, and slowly remove the glove, one finger at a time. I begin to trace his fingers again; draw the lines of his palm, each cross hatch mark from head to heart to life; paint further down to trace the seam of material against his wrist. I push my fingers up under the slick material just a fraction, then retreat, fold my hand around his, and let him consider the situation for a bit. His hand is cold, nervous, long fingers afraid to grasp, but he's still here, not fightin'.

From my belt, I take the controls and place them on the floor beside him. “This gets too much for you, then walk away, Scott,” I say softly, hoping to beer that he doesn't take it as an insult. He twists his head just enough to look at the controller. “Won't think nothin' of it. But,” I say, nudging his chin
to put his focus back on me, “I hope you stay.”

Even as my fingers run once again across his stubbled jaw, he considers the controls, of getting out, escaping. But, I can't blame him. I know what torture does to a person's soul, and with the way he always twists himself up over every little thing, I can only imagine what it's done to his. Taking a breath, I drop my hands away, scoot back against the wall, and let him ponder his decision.

It's a decision he doesn't want to make – staying or going, avoiding the pain or giving into something he's not sure about. I can see the thoughts work their way across his face, the movements of small muscles that I would never have noticed before. The nearly not there quiver of his lip, the twitch of his cheek, the rolling of jaw muscles, the nearly invisible movements of his brow. It's amazing how practiced he is at keeping his emotions in check, to not letting them show. I really do think, along with his ability to repress damn near everything he comes into contact with, to take as much pain as I do and keep going, the chessboard in his head, nukes living in his eyes, that being a damn stoic is another mutant ability.

Of course, the idiot makes the wrong decision. I see the shifting of his muscles under the skin tight uniform, but before he can get on his feet, I reach out and touch his knee. He's immediately confused, a fact not hidden by the raising of one brow. “Didn't give you the remote so you'd run, Slim. Gave it to you so you wouldn't feel trapped. Make no mistake,” I assume his thoughts, “I want ya here.”

“Logan,” he choked down his words with a shake of his head. The pain of Jean – the pain of failing her, of not being strong enough to help her – washes pallid over his face once again. He fights the innerworkings, swallowing to keep a wash of tears from destroying his well-practiced demeanor.

“I'm not Jean,” I soothe, taking back his hand, pulling him against the wall beside me. He looks away, lowers his head against his other shoulder. Gently, I press my hand against the top of his spine and feel a deep inhale as I rub against the bones and taut muscles. He curls up on himself again, head on knees, arms around legs, allowing me to continue. I really, truly have absolutely no idea what he's thinking, what he's feeling, as I continue to stroke his spine.

If it were me, I'd be hoping for a full massage by now, a little shoulder work, lower back. Maybe get my spine cracked, followed by a little happy... Well, that's me. That's what I'd want. But Summers? I got no idea, and I'm positive he ain't gonna tell me. Bigger problem, if I screw up and pick the wrong thing, then that could be the end. As deep as he is in this, he'll probably shut down and I'll never see him again. Bad enough what I damn near did to him yesterday, but today? Cracking a man's pride ain't an easy thing to live through, especially when that pride is pretty much the only thing that gets him through a day.

Damn it.

His hand flings back and reaches for the control, and before I can reel in my thoughts to see what he's doing, he's done half way across the room heading for the open door. I almost chase him, but I think better of it. I've known Summers long enough to know that once his mind's made up, there ain't no changin' it, for better or worse. Maybe that's another mutant ability.
Chapter Summary

Managing the survival of an entire race takes more than just discipline and focus. Sometimes a bit of cunning is needed.

Chapter Notes

More coming.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“But I'm out of toothpaste,” Nori whines.

Emma rolls ice blue eyes and taps her fingers on the table. “Then you should have said something before he left this morning,” she bites back.

“Yeah, you try talking to him after a meeting!” Nori argues, eyes a-squint and an electric impulse hovering over her hands. “He needs to get this whole supply thing under control like three days ago ‘cause this is fucking nuts.”

Diamond glimmers across Emma’s once flesh form. “Watch your language, young lady -”

“Yeah, like you don't curse like a sailor -”

Jeweled lips twist into a vicious smile. “Do as I say, not as I do,” she warns the young mutant. “Now, as for your sudden lack of toothpaste, I certainly recall Mr. Summers gathering all of you together last week to find out what you needed. I do not recall toothpaste being on that list.”

Nori smooths a hand through thick blue hair. “Yeah, well, I didn't need it last week. I need it this week.”

“That's why you gotta plan ahead, punkin',” I interrupt before Nori's insolence wears Emma's patience even further.

“I'm not your punkin',” she retorts, and then rolls her eyes in defeat.

Emma recalls herself, the diamond slowly melting away from porcelain skin. “I'm sure that one of your friends has toothpaste, Noriko,” she smooths, “But, do Cyclops a favor, don't wait until the last second to tell him what you need.”

Nori nods silently and stomps across the War Room, down the hall. Once she's out of sight, I close and lock the door. “Aren't you supposed to be on patrol?” Emma asks, amused.

“Just finished,” I respond, “Course you would've known if you'd bothered to answer sign-off.”

She stretches her perfect arms behind her head, the snip of smile across her cheek. “Babysitting a
bunch of ruffians on patrol is far beneath my skills,” she quips.

“Didn't know you were s'posed to, did ya?” I smile and take a seat.

She shrugs in response, turning a brief moment of attention to one of the many screens. A reporter - trying her best to contain her excitement - tells her captive audience how the leader of the mutant race has just entered the San Francisco courthouse, and that further details would come shortly.

“Did he intend to make a scene?” I question, seeing this debacle as far outside his comfort zone as our time in the Danger Room a week ago.

She shakes her head. “No, but I did. Called every sympathetic reporter I know. Scott may prefer to keep his clandestine meetings with Mayor Sinclair secret, but there's political value in them. It shows the world that he's fearless, that he means to keep his word. That regardless of how we've been treated in the past, we still mean to protect them.”

Unintentionally, the laugh escapes my throat. I can't decide if she's brilliant or sadistic. “He's gonna be pissed.”

She stretches again, drawing long arms down to her calves, stroking upwards into thigh. “Perhaps,” she muses, “but, he's a reasonable man, and once he hears my reasoning, I think he'll be okay. Besides, if the world knows we're still here, it may help with donations.”

“Donations?”

A deep huff of a sigh relaxes her body as she turns off the screens. “Warren and I have been bankrolling his moments of hope since we arrived in San Francisco, but even our vast fortunes won't hold up forever. He's getting desperate, calling in old favors he never thought to cash, acting like the beggar king at times, the godfather at others, but we need what we need. And, if this stunt helps him in any way, shape or form, then I'm all for it. He's got enough on his shoulders without having to worry about toothpaste.”

It hits me then that Emma ain't Jean. She ain't no Valentine card, the fuzzy bunny everyone leaned on in times of trouble. Emma wears deception like a virtue, like it's the one thing that separates her from the rest of us, lets her rise above it all. “Summers is a blind man,” I say, clicking my tongue against my teeth.

“Don't pity me, you bloody idiot,” she scolds playfully with a wide smile on her face.

“Can't help it, darlin’.” She raises a refined brow in question, her smirk becoming slightly more wary.

“You love him, and here I am -”

“So do you,” she cuts in, her voice as measured as she can make it. “Trust me, Logan, I knew what I was getting into. Though, for a while, I hoped it would change, in my heart, I always knew it wouldn't. He does love me, you see, but I'm more of a... friend of sorts.”

“Of sorts?” The phrase was bait, but I give it to her.

He looked at the clothes laid out for him on the bed, and took a deep sigh. They were far more expensive than what he was used to, and his thoughts turned to how greedy it all seemed. “What's wrong with what I'm wearing?” he asked, motioning to the charcoal blazer and dark pants.

“Darling,” I purred, reaching my hand out to graze his shoulder. He avoided my touch at the last second.
Lazily, I beckoned him to his closet. Hanger upon hanger of jackets and ties, slacks and shirts, all organized neatly into color coded outfits. I pulled out the first hanger – an olive green jacket and dark blue slacks – and dumped onto the floor. “Surely, someone was making fun of you.”

He stared blankly at the clothes. “Olive green?” I scoffed, “That color went out of fashion before you were born.”

“I can’t see color, Emma,” he stated blandly as I continued to rip the fashion atrocities out of his closet.

“Maybe not,” I teased, “but surely you can see cut and hems and basic fit. You’re a beautiful man, Scott Summers, and hiding behind these rags does you no favors.”

With a sigh, he turned back to the clothes on the bed. “Go ahead and try them on,” I urged, “At least see how they fit before you start complaining.”

Noticing his hesitation, I crossed the room and began to remove his jacket. “No,” he said quietly. A deep breath, and he gathered the clothes in his arms and disappeared into the bathroom. I wanted to chide his modesty, as I would anyone’s, but he had his reasons, and I accepted them.

Returning shortly after, he stood in front of me, hands at his side, the dark blue blazer and barely violet shirt doing wonders for his complexion. The pants fit like a tailor’s dream, and any woman’s fantasy. I twirled my fingers, and he obeyed, turning around with my vocal approval. “He’ll definitely notice you now, darling.”

A moment of frustration drew deep lines in between his brows, and he began to remove the jacket. “Damn it, Emma, I told you to stay out of it,” he said through gritted teeth.

“You idiot,” I snarled and brought a pair of too-short khaki slacks to the side of his head. Surprised, he looked up at me, and relaxed when he saw my smile. “If anything, I know well enough how to make myself happy, dear. I’m a woman of exquisite taste, after all. But you, my sweet, sweet man... Don’t put off what could make you happy because you’re worried about hurting me.”

A sad smile lifted his right cheek. “I’m fine like this, Emma. Really. This is what I want.”

“And should I run off with Tony Stark the second I can pry his fingers off that damn secretary of his?”
His smile brightened a little. “Then so be it. It's not like you don't have classes in the morning.”

Delighted at his attempt at humor, I leaned in for a kiss, which he obliged. It was a playful kiss, tasting of chapstick, but more importantly, it was comfortable, for both of us. There was no sex here. Lust on my end, perhaps, but on his, it was simply love. A deep, abiding love that I was still surprised existed for me after everything I'd done in my life, but it was there, and it changed my very core.

“I love you, Emma,” he said, a tender caress of my face.

“And I love you, too, Scott,” I replied with a wink, “But I absolutely abhor your clothes, darling. Who on earth did your shopping? Whoever it was, I shall hunt them down with ferrets.”

“I'll admit,” her honeyed tone seeps through the air, “it's tempting to keep him. I do so love his lips. But,” she sighs, “at least I know that I'll always have a place in that heart of his, and that for me is enough.”

“Is it?” I ask, sensing the sadness to her words.

She covers quickly with a coy laugh. “Of course. He's already given me what I needed.”

“And what's that?”

“Redemption. A chance to prove that I've changed. That for all my faults, I really am worth keeping around. He fought for me, against all of you. He fought to bring me into the fold, to seek clemency for my less than wonderful behavior in the past. He was the first to forgive me, and that... That, Logan, is worth more than my weight in diamonds.”

She drums her manicured nails on the table, watching as her words crease my lips and crease my eyes with thought. “So, please, don't pity me, darling. My relationship with Scott is not what's at stake here. It's his relationship with you.”

Chapter End Notes

It was my intention to italicize memories, but I can't figure out how.
VI

Chapter Summary

A bomb threat at Dazzler's favorite club.

Chapter Notes

More coming.

“Rogue! Get down there!” Summers barks from the roof as he twists a man's arm and throws him through the air. Without a second thought, Rogue leaps from the roof and into the fray below. Cyclops continues his assault on the various assholes approaching him from all angles. “Pixie,” I hear him call, “Go high and stay there!”

Pixie, her little butterfly wings shivering with fear, follows the order to perfection, flying upwards, far away from the violence below her. Even from here, street level, I can tell she's crying. Rogue joins me in my own knock-out fest, punching and kicking and clawing our way through a nest of robot-suit-wearin'-jackasses who decided to take a run at Dazzler's favorite spot in town.

Above me, I see a flash of red, knowledge that Summers definitely has his hands full up top while we make our way towards the entrance in search of the bomb they claimed to have planted. Rogue and I continue to smash and bash. The robotic shells sting like a bitch when they crack, but my healing factor comes into play as soon as the shards are knocked out.

“Alley clear,” Rogue calls into the hiss of com. “Back up top, boss?”

“Inside,” he replies half-breathless. His voice comes in jolts and starts through static, a signal that he's still fighting. “Find the bomb.”

Club smells like old whiskey and sweat. Not the type of place I'd imagined Ali enjoyed, but she plays it enough that mutants recognize it as a place of their own. Though, I'm sure Summers woulda had us come out here anyway, considerin' we're better equipped to deal with a bomb than the SFPD. I can heal, they can't.

Rogue and I make our way through dark tables and rooms to a box set upon the high-rise stage at the back of the club. She's close to openin' it, but I stop her. “Could be rigged,” I say, indicating a set of wires linking through the wooden slats. Peering through the gaps in the wood, I see an LCD timer countin' down the minutes until detonation. “It's on a timer, Cyke,” I breathe into the com.

Just as the com picks up on his end, I hear his pained groan. The com goes dead for a few moments, and Rogue gives me a worried glance. “I'll go,” she says, but I shake my head.

“Give him a sec,” I breeze with confidence. Moments pass and Rogue's anxiety increases, but I remain confident. “That bastard doesn't go down easy.”
As if on cue, the com starts back up with static. “Tell me what you see, Logan,” Summers commands around the same time he gives a hefty grunt. A body falls nearby.

“Four wires through a wood box, an LCD timer.”

A sharp breath followed by an angry growl, then the buzz-zap of angry red eyes. “Payload?” he asks out of breath.

I peer again through the slats, squinting hard, hoping my old eyes can adjust enough to the darkness. “Maybe C-4,” I reply, “but it could be anything.”

“ Heard,” he says. “Pixie!”

The com goes silent. Moments later, I hear his voice from behind. “Rogue, guard the door. Not sure if they were finished or just changed tactics. Police should be on their way. Remind them about the dozen on the roof.” There’s a hitch in his breath that comes from a couple of cracked ribs, fresh bruises on what I can see of his face, and a nice, deep slice running from the tip of his collar bone down to his navel, but he acts like none of it happened. Pixie follows behind him waiting for orders. “Go wait with Rogue. If those mechs come back, get back to base and bring Colossus.” Pixie floats away on still-nervous wings.

“If this goes south,” he states matter-of-factly, “I want you sitting on it. Limit the blast radius.”

Normally, I’d say something crude right about now, how I’d rather be sitting on him, but I decide against irking his ire any further than his ire’s already irked. Like me, he peers through the slats. Raising back up, he takes a deep breath, and slowly runs his fingers along the edge of the box against the floor. “No wires beneath?” he asks, assuaging his doubt with a second pair of eyes.

Mimicking his earlier actions, I trace the edge of the box. “Nah, just the ones through the slats.”

“Good,” he says, and carefully begins turning the box around. He feels my tension. “Light's bad,” he explains. “Could be more than four wires.”

As he slowly twists the box, he stares deep inside, looking at the make up of the bomb. “I think it's safe to lift the lid.”

“Think it’s safe?” I question. “Better stand back a few feet,” I caution, waiting for him to jump off the stage and head for the door.

With a grumbled sigh, he pulls the lid off the box and stares at the mechanisms inside. I swear he's rollin' his eyes right now. Fucking arrogant asshole.

The clock face stands at five minutes, meanin' he ain't breakin' a sweat yet. He takes his time to inspect the elements. He traces a wire from behind the clock, down through a series of circuits, then to the C-4 payload stuck at the back of the box. “What color's this one?” he asks.

“Blue.”

“And this one?” he asks, tenderly fingering another wire from the side of the clock face that goes a similar route.


Three minutes left, and Cyke's still cool as a cucumber. “Cut the green one,” he concedes at last.
The metallic snkt of claws, and he waits impatiently at the side of the bomb. “You gettin' back or what?” I ask before I make the potentially fatal cut.

“Why?” he asks.

“It's a bomb, Cyclops.”

“Yes, it is, Wolverine. Now disarm it.”

“Get back a few feet and I will. This thing goes and-”

“Cut the green one,” he commands. Judgin' by the grit in his jaw and the crease of his brow, he ain't budgin'.

“Your life, One-eye.”

Of course, Cyclops is right. As soon as my claw snaps the thin green wire, the clock face goes flat. Without an ounce of pleasure taken in his rightness, he continues to dismantle the bomb. “Blue.” “Red.” And on through the wires without hesitation.

Wires snipped, he carefully lifts the C-4 out of the box, just as the flash and alarm of sirens pull up outside.

Slim hands the relieved detectives the C-4, and discreetly accounts for all the prisoners taken into custody, relieved that none escaped in our moments of bomb-distraction. He politely shakes hands with the six or so officers who've come to clean up the mess. He wears a professional, practiced smile, his tone nothing but business.

“Cyclops,” Pixie trembles, “I'm sorry. I got freaked out. Maybe I wasn't ready,” she mews in the brief moment he steps away from SFPD. She expects either wrath or forgiveness, she gets neither.

“Danger Room sessions for the next two months, seven a.m. sharp,” Cyke replies without coldness or warmth.

It's an asshole move, and he knows it. Kid needs comfort, not a command. So, I tell him so, but receive nothin' but a blank red stare. “You did fine, Pix,” I tell her, loud enough so that he can hear me while he continues with the cops. “Don't let that donkey's butt tell you any different.” Her magical giggle shakes her slender shoulders.

After the headaches of witness accounts and all else, Pixie transports us back to Utopia. “Danger Room,” he reminds Pixie. “Seven a.m.” His sharp tone brings her back to the reality of her 'failing' in her mission. In tears, she hovers off.

“You're an ass, Summers,” I call after him. He doesn't respond.

Three a.m. and he's still awake. I can hear the patter of the keyboard, the muted volume of multiple screens. I see him, through the window, plodding away on our survival. For a second, I think he notices me, but I turn away too quickly to be sure.
Cecelia Reyes – dressed in a loose white martial arts get up - claps her hands together and bows as she approaches the door to the Danger Room. Her smile is brighter than it was the last time I saw her some months ago, her eyes more purposeful. “Logan,” she greets pleasantly. “I was hoping to run into you sometime.”

It's funny how on an island of less than 200 people that you still see people you don't expect. “When'd you get here?”

“Second day arrival,” she explains. “Been busy in Med Bay, not that you'd know because you never need medical attention.”

I laugh. “Yeah, well, might just change my mind about that.”

A brief, warm hug. “You're not here for the class, are you?” she questions, her face all tipped for confusion. Obviously not, or so she gathers by the way I tilt my head. “Yeah, I was gonna say, if you think you need this class, then we're all doomed.”

“What class?”

“Self defense. Little Aikido, Judo, Krav Maga, other things thrown in here and there. Cyclops insisted. Said we needed to be able to protect ourselves in case... Well, you know what in case means.”

“Yeah,” I mutter, “I know what in case means.”

I follow her into a non programmed Danger Room and take my stance against the back wall. He sits at the center of the room, barefoot, legs crossed, quiet and calm. His 'students' chatter back and forth, none nervous, save for Pixie who is new to the class. They all wear traditional martial arts clothes – loose sleeves and pant legs, colored belts. At seven a.m. sharp, he stands and the class follows. He talks them through their warm up stretches and moves on to instructing their punches and kicks. Throughout it all, he is factual and observant, straightening slightly bent arms, locking wrists, extending legs into more profitable kicks. He adjusts their fingers into proper holds, their feet into firmer stances. He takes extra care to watch Pixie, correcting her over and over again, but never once losing his patience. Her face is that of sheer determination to get it right.

The floor exercises are pretty entertaining, a chance to practice what they've learned. But rather than
use each other, it's Scott - even after yesterday's damage - who takes the brunt of the lesson. It's the easiest way to perfect their timing and holds. Time and again, they throw him to the floor, lock his arm behind his back, cage him with their elbows and knees. With each technique, he's back on his feet in seconds, correcting their form, before being jolted back onto the floor once again.

Pixie stands on shaky knees in front of Scott. “I-I'm not sure, Mr. Summers,” she stammers. “What if I don't remember?”

“You won't,” he replies without a hint of sarcasm. “That's what practice is for, so you do remember.”

Step by step, he walks her through the throw, correcting her feet and hands as they go. Once she gives the nod, he comes at her with some speed, calling out the steps. With shaky hands, she grabs his elbow to lock his arm, then locks his wrist and attempts the throw. She almost makes it, but he's more than double her weight and fails.

She sniffs in her defeat, but Scott pretends not to notice. He walks her through the steps again, explains what she did wrong. Ten tries later, and she's still unable to toss him. As he again goes through the form, he absentmindedly presses his hand against his shoulder. I can imagine that an hour of being tossed around by the same arm does wonders for joint pain, but he doesn't quit.

Once again, little Megan nods. “Get angry,” he tells her. She nods, pinching her face down as tight as she can. “Angrier,” he calls, watching her little fists ball up. “Here I come,” he says, taking four steps forward before she locks his arm and throws him to the ground. Her moment of triumph is surrounded with hoots, hollers and applause from the other students.

What she doesn't know, what he hides behind the blandness of his leader-face, is that the throw was technically incorrect, and she dislocated his already pained shoulder. As they leave, he instructs them to keep practicing, keeping his hands low to protect knowledge of the injury and not take away from Pixie's victory over her fear. “Thank you, Mr. Summers,” she flutters. “I'll see you tomorrow!” A new found confidence, she twirls across the room and down the hall.

Scott acknowledges my continued presence with a nod, and makes his way to the exit. Of course, I shut the door. He doesn't hide his aggravation. Lowered brow and throated sigh, his mouth pulls into a tight frown.

“Let me take a look at your shoulder, Slim.”

“I'm fine,” he breathes, trying in vain to sidestep me.

“Oh yeah?” I tug on the injured arm. He cringes. “Sit,” I command.

“I'm fi-”

“Sit, damn it.” I tug again, harder this time, a moment of temper over always havin' to fight with him. My frustration almost backfires, but I quickly attempt a Frosty recovery. “Let me fix your shoulder or I'm gonna tell Namor about this little class o' yours. Sure he'd be real interested to watch a time or two, tell you how exactly your defenses suck, and how weak your people are. Imagine the look on his face when he sees little Pixie toss you to the ground like a hot potato.”

An angered heat courses through his veins as his pride is threatened. He knows I'm not bluffing.

“Sit,” I tell him again, and reluctantly, he obeys.

The simple white robe that he wears in class is by far easier to deal with than the thick fabric of his uniform. In a matter of seconds, I have his shoulder free, revealing part of yesterday's damage. Half peeled bandages along his padded cracked rib cage reveal a nasty, swollen bruise. Blood soaked gauze along his chest point to the reopening of the gash he aquired. Cuts, scrapes, and more bruises
pepper across his already scarred body. And then the shoulder, red and swollen, warm to the touch.

I can't help but inhale the deep scent of his earlier workout mixed with clean scented aftershave and at least three cups of coffee. He tenses as I put one hand against his chest, and slide the other one tenderly up his back. His breath falters, lips part, the dip of Adam's apple. “Relax, Slim,” I ease, and wait for him to regain himself. “This is gonna hurt a bit,” I warn. He replies with a gentle nod. In a blink, I pop the wayward shoulder back into place, eliciting a pained grunt and held breath from Summers. But, I don't remove my hands as the pain subsides. A long, warm silence.

I still don't release him from my grip, and by the way he's breathin', I don't think he wants me to.

I start with a gentle massage of the sore shoulder, gently pressing into knotted muscles, trying to ease them into something less than wired up balls of stress. His head lowers, breath slows into thick, heavy puffs of air. His posture begins to melt as I press a little harder - working thumb and fingers into corded muscles - so much so that I brace him across the chest with my other arm. He comes to sudden awareness, ready to flee after having forgot himself once again. “Relax, Slim,” I whisper in his ear, taking a chance on brushing my lips against his reddening, sensitive ear lobe. He takes a deep breath and involuntarily licks his lips. Not breaking full contact, I inch my self behind him, run my hand across his other shoulder, picking up white cloth as I go. He swallows as I pull his arm free of the other sleeve, leaving him vulnerable and open, something he so rarely is. Both hands squeeze down on too-tense shoulders. Breath stops, head lowers. As I ply my hands across his shoulders, his body begins to dip forward once more. So, I brace him again, my legs wrapped around waist, over thighs, feet twisted under his knees, locking him in place. Again, he's ready to bolt. “Relax, Slim,” I whisper, and place a gentle kiss on the back of his neck. A soft-throated moan, bare-voiced - quiet as a mouse - and a faint trace of vanilla, escapes his parted lips at the touch. I tread my fingers once again into tight, aching muscles. His deeply held breath and trembling jaw. As the massage continues, he starts to melt into my touch, pushing back into my hands to deepen the pressure, so I oblige. I travel down his spine, around his shoulder blades, careful of the fresh bruises and damaged ribs, and then back up to his neck. He looses his breath entirely, dips forward, as I put pressure on the still tense muscles, as if suddenly, I'd pushed a magic button and disappeared a year's worth of tension. I brace him fast from falling further with a hand against his heart. This time, he doesn't attempt retreat.

For long seconds, I listen to him breath as I scratch my fingers up into his hair, then down the side of his neck. Again and again, I repeat, until floral breath is so ragged, his skin so warm, his mouth open, anticipating. I pull him back against my chest and like a rag doll lost to a delicious dream, he complies. Thumb over hardening nipple, fingers press harder at the side of his neck, coaxing his head to the side, to open up the delectable pale skin. He waits for it, his brow perched in hope, his barely-there breath, his lower lip wet and moist drug between his perfect white teeth. I wrap my other arm under him, press him back further into my chest. Hold him still, tight, and graze his pulse with hungry lips. His body trembles, his heart races, and the heady scent of his arousal fills the room. Harder, this time, I press my lips against his pulse, a careful dash of tongue swirled across his heated skin. A soft moan escapes, unwilling but inevitable.

He leans his head back onto my shoulder as I find the soft spot behind his ear, nuzzling it with my nose, before swirling soft wet circles over top. Another moan escapes as I ply my fingers into the well-worked muscles of his chest. An unexpected nip at his earlobe, and his methodical baritone gets lost in the back of his throat.

Gently, carefully, so as not to frighten him, I nudge his chin towards me and run the tip of rough
finger across his lower lip. Stare deep into the depths of his visor. Pull his lips closer, closer...

Fuck. Wrong move, yet again. The touch brings memories to the surface. Of what, I don't know, but I can see them play across his face like old nightmares. Wracked by guilt or pain or who knows what all goes on in that mind o' his, he turns his head away from me. Once again he loses his battle to flight. He struggles to move, but I hold on. He continues to push against my hold, against the memories that fly at him like bullets, but I keep myself still, unyielding, and calm. I place another kiss at the nape of his neck. He buckles. A long silence. “I'm sorry,” he whispers.

“Don't be,” I answer, pulling my arms tight around him, under arm and over shoulder, press flat palm against the scattered beat of his heart, and the other against his uncracked ribs. I speak into the back of his head, soft words. “Ain't done nothin' to be sorry for, Scotty.” He sinks his forehead into my arm and together, we wait for the moment to pass.
Chapter Summary

Head table isn't always professional.

Chapter Notes

More chapters.

A half hour later, as he stands in the War Room, there's not a trace of vulnerability left. Scott Summers is all hard lines and deadlines, doin' the job no one else wanted to do, and doin' his best to keep us alive. With Emma at his side, he telepathically runs the island through a laundry list of duties for the day – tendin' gardens, cleanin' hallways, collectin' water, and settin' out more lighted fishing nets that Namor can see from the depths and won't accidentally swim into again. He sends two patrols to the city, keeps one here, sets another group on meeting a supply ship due in a few hours. Explains a rotating roster for guardin' food supplies because someone helped themselves to an entire week's worth o' bread and lunch meat meant for everyone. He asks for questions, comments, and concerns, but none are voiced, so he ends the transmission with a polite thank-you, and pulls up the X-Club screen.

Jeffries and Nemesis update him on the power situation, let him know about their progress, and give him hope that if all goes well, they'll soon be generating enough power to sell some back into the San Francisco grid. Rao offers up a list of needs as far as medical supplies, a list he writes in rushed handwriting. Rao speaks fast when she's busy. Beast adds on his own supply needs, namely test tubes and a specific range of microscope lenses. Then Jeffries pipes back up, adding in a list of tech that he wishes he could get his hands on, especially if Scott expects the lack-of-recycling situation to be remedied anytime soon.

From there, he moves on to requisite order forms, a list of open accounts, a growing list of needs from the havened mutants, financial statements, and coming donations, just as the rest of the head table begins to file in. Several eyebrows are raised as I'm here much earlier than usual, and sitting beside Emma, but I pay it no mind.

No sooner than they sit does the table erupt in a list of complaints and whines about life on the asteroid, each one feeling their complaint more valid than the rest. Tired, still glancing at financial accounts, he lets the grumbling grow into a mild roar before he takes his seat. He hopes for silence, but he doesn't get it.

“If my people get caught by another net -” Namor begins his cautionary tale.

But, Scott cuts him off quickly. “We added some lights to the nets,” he explains calmly. “Let me know if they're visible. If not, we can try some with higher lumens, but-.”

“Why not use higher lumens to begin with?” the fish-king presses.
“We want live fish, not charred ones,” he remarks with a dare to his voice. Namor smiles at the veiled threat, and leans back in his chair satisfied – perhaps moreso that Slim is one of the few brave enough to speak to him in such a manner rather than the solution.

One by one, he gives them each a chance to complain about their situation – from a lack of blankets to a lack of entertainment – and he takes their issues one by one, writing down that which he feels is necessary. “Movie nights are the last thing on my mind, right now, Bobby,” he explains patiently. “If people are that bored then they can head into the city.”

“The city takes money, Cyke,” Bobby argues. “Most of us are not Moneybags Worthington.” A comment to which Warren takes issue, but before he can volley the insult--

“He has a point,” a day-visiting Ororo jumps in. “While entertainment may not be a need, it is still something that people expect.”

“And,” Bobby continues with a smile, “it'll make people happy! Which, I know is a foreign concept to you, Cyke, ol' pal, but the rest of us, we like to dabble in a--”

“We don't have room for a theater, Bobby, and spending money on renovation, equipment and films while we have more pressing issues seems more than childish.” His tone is blunt, cut to the chase. “But, you do have a point --”

“About happiness being a foreign concept to you?” he teases, but instead of laughter, he gets a sharp growl from Emma.

“About the entertainment, you dimwit,” she curses.

“Emma,” Scott intercedes before things get worse. He takes a calming breath, his face remains still. “Morale is morale, and the island could use a boost right now. Movies are out, but we do have a satellite feed, so maybe do a TV night in the Common Room. I'll talk to Alison and see if she can get us a karaoke machine.”

“Karaoke?” Bobby snuffs at the idea.

“While it is a bit gauche for some, Mr. Drake, others quite enjoy it,” Emma snipes back.

Scott taps the table to return attention to himself. “We've got a pool table, we could try a talent show...”

“Wow, Scott,” Bobby interrupts again, “you are the king of fun, I tell you.”

“Like you would know fun if it bit you on the arse,” Emma snipes.

Bobby smiles. “Nah, that's more your type of fun, Whip Queen.”

Betsy, her face marked my disbelief, slams her hand against the table. “Hey, Snow-man, that was uncalled for.”

“Come on,” Bobby huffs, “She's the one that likes karaoke.”

“What's wrong with karaoke?” Rogue breaks in.

Namor smiles deviously at Emma. “With proper accord and attire, I might not mind indulging in your bit of fun.”

“You're not biting my ass, Namor,” Ems calls back.
“If you insist on treating women like this Namor,” Storm cautions, “then I will have to-”

The table erupts in a fury of arguments and back handed remarks. Scott, tired as heck, sighs and leans back in his chair. As the noise continues, he squeezes the bridge of his nose and lowers his brow tight in an unseen squint. Returning to his usual coolness, he raises his hand off the armrest. “Five,” he says as loudly as he can without yelling.

From my perch at the corner of the table, I watch the chaos with amusement. All it takes is a mention of karaoke and Emma's ass and the whole world goes to hockey sticks. “Four,” Scott counts again in the same calm tone. Storm is the first to take notice of the numbers.

“Three.” Warren and Piotr are the next, eyes wide like school kids caught smokin' in the bathroom. Warren tries to gain the attention of the others still arguing.

“Two.” Kurt, Betsy, Namor and Rogue are the next to settle down, taking their seats quietly. Their eyes lowered in shame, except for Namor who is all impish grin and fish smell.

Just as Emma and Bobby realize they're the last two standing, he says, “One.”

Emma and Bobby take their seats. Cyclops points across the room to a row of meager windows and taps the corner of his ruby quartz frames in warning. His voice comes out as bitter and dark as good black coffee. “The next person to act like a spoiled child in a toy store – especially while sitting at this table - will be sent crashing through those windows without hesitation. We're adults, people. Let's start acting like it.”

Though the meeting ends some time later, and most of us journey off to accomplish our list of tasks for the day, Cyclops remains behind in a maelstrom of to-do's and what if’s. A phone call with Mayor Sinclair, a political contact who apprises him of Osborne's latest whim, a possible mutant sighting east of Chicago, a broken tractor, a need for translators, a storm alert, and so on and so forth.

By the time my patrol ends eight hours later, I catch him in the War Room with Emma. She pushes a cup of coffee and untouched meal of fish and rice towards him, but he waves her off and returns to the mountains of paperwork on the table. Pissed off, she stomps out of the room, her high heels echoing in the hallway.
Buzzed on white wine, Emma rolls her ice blue eyes and smiles. “He's such a cad,” she mumbles and laughs to herself.

“Bobby or Slim?”

She erupts in a delightful chirp of laughter. “Namor. Namor is the cad. Imagine thinking that he would ever be given the privilege of biting my arse. I paid far too much for it to be ruined by the likes of him.”

“You're one helluva woman, Ems,” I say with complete and utter respect.

“Aren't I, though?” she coos in reply. She shakes the empty glass in front of me. “How long has your whistle been dry, Logan?”

“I'm okay right now,” I say. “I think you are, too.” I grab the bottle before she does, pushing the cork back in and put the wine in the fridge.

She grabs the hem of my sleeve and gives it a tug. A soft, sad smile on her face. “Whatever you did this morning, you shook him up.”

“Is that good or bad?” I ask.

She shrugs. “I don't know. He won't let me in to find out.”

“He blocked you?”

“Well,” she sighs with an eye roll, “I could get in, but he doesn't want me there right now, so I'm staying out of it. Everyone needs their private time, and so long as he isn't standing on a rooftop claiming that he's sprouted wings, he's entitled to it as well.”

I walk back around the small breakfast counter, and take the stool opposite Emma. “Didn't realize you were so restrained, Ems,” I quip, hoping to lighten the mood.

“Restraint is my middle name, darling,” she purrs. “Miss Emma Restraint Frost.” Blue eyes roll to the ceiling, then back to me. “That's not as catchy as I thought it would be.”

“No, definitely not catchy.” A deep laugh shakes loose from my stomach. “Blame it on the wine.”
“Indeed!” Her eyes brighten with joy, but then settle back into seriousness. The alcohol continues to soak into her bloodstream. Her movements become sloppy, so unlike herself. “Does he talk about me, Logan?”

I take a deep breath. Blue eyes go glassy, yet another rare sight in just a matter of days. “He doesn't much talk about anything, Ems.”

“Mmm,” she nods knowingly, and quickly wipes the forming tears from her eyes.

“Funny,” I muse into the sudden silence between us.

“What is?”

“When I was chasin' after Jean, didn't bother me what anyone thought. Not Jean, not Scott. Not one lick o' guilt. But, right now --”

“Please,” the White Queen scoffs, “Jean was a bloated bovine that everyone and their mothers looked up to as some sort of saint, when she clearly wasn't.” Disbelief and disgust gnarl otherwise perfect features. “Why did you chase after her?”

“Dunno. Maybe 'cause behind the fluff, I sensed somethin' a bit too much like me? Besides, couldn't exactly chase after Scott.”

“Why not?”

“Straight laced, ring on his finger, loyal to a fault, fucking eat-your-broccoli-then-save-the-world-do-gooder? Yeah, right. Like that was ever gonna happen.”

Her face morphs into one of amusement. A smile curls up, lifting just-blushed cheeks, a twinkling inside crystal blue eyes. Her voice is sugar sweet and laughter. “And, then, out of the blue, after years of playing at Alpha male to vent your frustrations, you suddenly decide to cop a feel of his balls?”

“Yeah, well...” I chuckle to myself. “Wasn't exactly the plan,” I explain, rubbing my chin. “But, once I did, it was do or die. Anything less and I think he woulda beamed my brains out through my ears.”

Emma laughs, her eyes bloodshot with the wine. “I can tell you, he was shocked. He actually cursed in my head when you did it, and then this very profound, very shocked silence. A singular, 'Fuck', and then all thought just left the building.” The laughter shakes through her body bringing happy tears to her eyes. She laughs so hard at the memory that she can't stop. Blushed face and beautiful.

“Oh, of course, afterwards,” she starts again when the giggles subside, “it scared him, but initially...” She trails off, losing herself to wine-soaked thoughts.

*He'd failed her. The only thought racing through his mind. To him, even after everything he'd learned, the fault remained his. It was his weakness that drove her into madness the first time, his lack that drove her to death the second. His distance, his coldness, his doubt, his betrayal. Like a statue, stone and frozen, he stared down at her grave.*

*As I watched from the distance, watched the man I'd finally ripped from her arms, I wanted to scream at him, remind him of everything she'd inflicted upon him, but that would have accomplished nothing other than a cold stare. She was dead. He would not speak ill of the dead. Instead, I talked to him of business, of rebuilding the school, reforming the team. I could feel the hesitation in his mind, his weariness. The destruction of the institute, the breaking apart of the X-men, the madness around Xavier, Jean's predilection for death scenes - from beginning to end, to him, they joined a*
long list of other things that he was simply too weak to prevent. He was tired of failing.

My heart shook as he took that first step away from me. His hands dug deep in his coat pockets, his face stern and unreadable. I saw in his mind that he was done with it all, ready to quit, and my heart began to sink. Through my time of sharing his thoughts, his dreams had become my own, a part of what I so desperately wanted to achieve with my life. My chance at redemption, my chance at being something more, something better than anyone ever gave me credit for. He was the only one that ever gave me hope like that, the only one to believe that I should have it.

A second step and I felt the breaking apart of my world. In my desperation, I stepped too, afraid of the distance that suddenly spawned between me and everything I'd hoped for. I wanted to call out, wanted to reach, but...

I felt his arms first, his wonderful, beautiful arms; how they wrapped around my shoulders, pulled me to the strength of his chest, held me in place, protected me, saved me. And then, the kiss. Far more passionate than I ever imagined it would be. Warm like the sun, tender, sweeping. I felt stars and moons trickle down my spine. My legs shook, my hands trembled. For the first time I could ever remember, I was truly overwhelmed.

When he finally broke away to give me a chance to breathe, he placed his hand upon my cheek and looked into my soul. “Thank you,” he whispered, and took my arm to lead me away.

“He's such an awkward man,” she slurs at last, after the silence has grown too heavy. The forced grin upon her face does not inject the levity that she hopes for. “I don't know why I'm doing this to you.”

“Doin' what?” I already know what she's talking about, this little tug o' war she's playin' against herself right now, draggin' me into it. But, I figure if he won't talk, at least she will, and hell, maybe one o' the two of them will work through something.

“Promise me,” she says, hooking her finger into mine, “No matter how much of a sad sack I become, no matter how I disgrace myself with begging or pleading, don't back down. I can make him content, but you can make him happy. Promise me, Logan.”

I want to shake my head, tell her that's impossible, but it's not, and I know it. I can be a heartless motherfucker when it comes down to it, especially when I want something. And right now, I want Scott Summers. I squeeze my finger around hers, and nod. “I promise.”
Chapter Summary

Someone needs a nap.

Chapter Notes

Hope you're still with me.

It's well past midnight by the time I make it down the stairs. The lights and screens of the War Room are still on full blast, and there sits Summers, still at work on keepin' the dream alive. The table is scattered with dozens of blue prints and forms, surveillance pictures from the mainland, maps, charts, scans, official documents. Whatever he's working on right now, he's frustrated.

Summers takes off his glasses, his eyes shut tight, revealing deep dark circles under his eyes. He rubs his eyes and nose and forehead vigorously before replacing the lenses and taking a large gulp of coffee to keep him going through another endless night of worry. Clicking through the computer screens, he scurries through his mash of too-organized papers. Finding what he's after, he returns to the computer and rubs his still-sore shoulder. He refocuses, and begins making notes in black ink on whatever he scavenged from the mess on the table.

Strange how quiet it can be on this island. For all the metal, all the machines, all the people lumped into this one space, it's as silent as winter sometimes. Stranger still how that silence becomes a focus, a drive, to keep it like this. To keep it steady, keep it safe. Yet, even stranger, how that drive can become obsession, drive a man to stay awake for days on end trying to solve the next problem before it arrives on the doorstep and destroys what little peace we've managed to carve out for ourselves here.

For just a second, as he leans his head upon his hand, I swear he nods off.

“Cyke, I got a big problem,” I call out, standing in the doorway. He's too tired to be alarmed, too weary of my recent ploys to trust me at the moment. An audible breath through his nose, and his blank face stares at me in waiting. “Well?” I urge, gesturing wildly to get him to rise from his chair with his normal penchant for endless anxiety.

“What's the problem, Logan?” Scott drones, doing his best to keep our earlier interactions out of his tired tone.

“You have to come see it to believe it.” I'm a good liar, always have been, but even so, I don't think he believes me.

He shakes his head with a sigh, too tired to even care to play the game. “Just tell me what it is.”

Sensing he's about five seconds away from throwing me out, I scramble. “My washing machine,” I finally spit out in a spark of genius. “It imploded.”
Confusion tilts his head and lowers his jaw. “What?”

“My washing machine imploded,” I repeat, a little more sure of my plot. “It just went phfflt,” I voice and I gesture an implosion with my palms, “Sucked right in on itself. Think maybe you should come take a look at it, talk to Jeffries about it or somethin’?”

He's definitely not shy about this new aggravation, and still not sure if he trusts me enough to believe it. After long minutes of another stare-down-antler-challenge, he finally relents with a shake of his head. “Fine,” he sighs, and begins to clean up his mess.

In no actual hurry to see my imploded washing machine, he takes his time sorting through his papers, stacking them into perfect piles. It's enough that I think he may be playing me instead of the other way around. With an exasperated growl, I gather the papers together myself, much to his vehement protest, fold them up in his computer, and turn off the lights in the War Room. Grabbing him by the arm, I lead him down the hall.

“Boy,” he grumbles sarcastically, “this imploded washing machine must have really scared you, Logan.”

“Shut up, Cyke,” I snark back. Yeah, he was playin’ me, but luckily, I'm still stronger than he is, and so long as I keep my iron grip on his shoulder, he won't blast me in case he rips off half his body in the process.

“Logan, I have work to do.”

“I know.”

“Really important work.”

“I know.”

“Seriously, I'm not in the mood for more games, Logan.”

“I know.”

We're still two hallways down from my room when he finally gets the strength to make his stance. He stops in his tracks and digs nails into my wrist. He swallows, his jaw clenched tighter than a clam shell, his brow as smooth as silk. “Look,” he says calmly, trying his best not to break, “whatever this is, whatever you're thinking, Logan, I can't.” He tightens his lips and shakes his head, controlling the wave of breakage happening behind red lenses. “Please,” he breathes, “I just – I just can't.”

For long moments I watch his face as it mulls through his discomfort, the tiny flexes of muscles, hints of the emotions that flood behind his strict resolve. “I know,” I say at last, and continue my march down the hall with him in tow.

My room is a closet compared to his, but no one complained when Emma claimed the large quarters at the end of the upstairs hall. After all, it was her boyfriend's plan that floated this heap from the depths of the ocean, and her boyfriend that was keepin' it all together, so no one thought twice about livin' in a closet while they enjoyed their fancy digs. Even if they did, I doubt much woulda come of it, as Emma would have had several choice words for the idiot who did complain, and Emma Frost's words are -more often than not- very well chosen.

A bed, a lamp, a set o' drawers, a knee-high bookshelf, and a side table with an ashtray. That's about all I got in here now that I destroyed my washing machine -'bout what most of us got - but I didn't bring him here to show the scarcity of the place. I shove him inside the room and pull the door closed
behind me. I set the keypad lock, something I usually refrain from doing, but in this case it's gonna be a necessity.

He tilts his head back and groans, hoping he'll be able to talk his way outta here before long. “Logan -”

“Stop this, Slim,” I caution and point at the bed. “Sit.” He refuses. “Fine, stand there,” I say with a smile. “Won't be much longer 'fore you pass out anyway.”

He shakes his head, far too tired to even comprehend what I'm saying. He's not sure if it's a threat or a joke, but either way, he's going to challenge it. “Do you do this crap just to spite me?” I say to spur out his confusion a little longer. “Just sit, damn it, take a load off, stop being a fucking goat for five seconds -”

“Did you just call me a goat?” he questions, completely thrown off track.

“Yeah, I did.” I step into him, my face tense with anger, forcing him back in his confusion. “What're you gonna do about?”

“Logan, I -I have work -” he stutters, stepping backwards again to avoid getting pushed. He's too tired to fight right now, and too annoyed to let me goad him into it.

Chest puffed out, mouth all tense, I continue pushing forward to hedge him back until he finally trips onto the bed. “Good,” I say, “Now lay the fuck down.”

Flight response triggered, I instantly slam my hand against his chest, forcing him down. Hand goes for the glasses, and I click my tongue. “You blast up, you take out half the cafeteria. You blast forward, you take out Santo's room; left, you crash Piotr's room. Blast my door, you take a damn good chance of blowin' up Kurt's room. Now lay the fuck down, close your eyes, and stop worryin' that the world's gonna fall apart if you actually get a few hours sleep for once.”

His stubborn streak continues as I sit on the other side of the bed. Again, I push him down. “Lay down,” I sigh and crawl in bed beside him.

Fear sometimes has a sweet smell, a bit like burnt sugar, a way to let the predator know that flight or fight has been activated – a bit of warning, a bit of reprieve – the predator must make a choice between its empty stomach or the threat its angered prey might possess. Scott smells like fresh laundry, burnt caramel, and way too much coffee. “Look, this is all we're doin', just laying here, getting some sleep. That's all that's gonna happen right now. I'm tired, you're exhausted. Emma's drunk off her ass, probably keep you up the rest of the night. Me? I'm gettin' shut eye.”

I can feel a retort coming. “Before you get all anxious, I'll cover your defense class. And I swear, Scotty, the sky ain't gonna come crashin' down between now and then. Now, close your eyes and get some rest.” I turn off the lamp and roll onto my side.

Ten minutes later, snug as bug, I hear his breath even out, and he falls asleep. The caramel scent drifts away, and I can't help but pat myself on the back for a successful, hap-dash plan.
XI

Chapter Summary

Egg salad and chases.

Chapter Notes

I hope you're enjoying this continuing saga.

I don't know when it happened. I wish I did. I'd like to remember the moment, feel it happen. I drift awake some time later to find Scott's arm draped over top o' me, his red lenses buried into my scalp, body pressed against my back. His breath comes like soft, sleepy clouds of warmth splashing across the slowly rousing nerves of my neck. Long fingers, hardened from years of fighting, have collapsed over top of mine, barely entangled.

I can't help but wonder if he did this in his sleep, or if he was awake.

My thoughts carry back to the feel of his body pressed against mine. Even through our layers of clothes and the twisted up blanket between us, I can feel the warmth, the rise and fall of his chest, the sleepy patter of his heartbeat. I can feel the absent-minded pressure of his lips up against the top of my shoulder blade. I want those lips to move, to moisten, press. I want his arms to tighten around me, feel his hand travel up my arm and across my chest. I want to wake him up, and so I can collapse upon his mouth with all the passion and force that pumps through my veins. I want to taste that soft pale skin of his neck again, force the lustful moans to escape his unwilling lips again and again. I want to be inside of him, to feel a part of him. I want. Man, do I want.

I gulp down the parading fantasies and take a deep breath before my lust makes things harder than they already are. I promised him a night of sleep. I intend to keep it that way.

Some time later, I wake again. I carefully untwine myself from his still sleeping hold, pull the blanket up over his shoulders, and duck out the door.

Not many are awake this time of morning, mostly just night patrol, though I'm sure those geniuses down in the X-Club are still wide awake and working. I hear James Proudstar - his hulking frame eerily quiet as he stalks down the hall – whisper an all clear to Sam Guthrie, his patrol leader tonight. James, pissed that he's still on night patrol, barely gives me a nod.

I make it up the stairs and type in the pass code for Emma's door. She's passed out drunk, curled up on the plush white love seat, having finished the rest of the wine after I left. I cover her up with a blanket pulled from the bed, and peek into their shared closet. Without paying much attention, I grab a hanger from the rack, tuck it under my arm, and lock the door behind me.

Down to the kitchen, I rustle an egg sandwich out of the fridge, and fix up a thermos of coffee.
Proudstar gives me a questioning look as he passes back through, but a shrug from me and he ignores it.

Finally, I make it back to my room, a little worried that the asshole's escaped in my absence, but lucky me, he's still passed out. On his stomach, arms folded under pillows, he's managed to spread himself across the whole bed – which, isn't that difficult considering it's a twin size. I think it's the first time I've ever seen him look so unaware of everything. Shower time, then class. I think I'll cut his class short today.

The alarm goes off at 8:30 a.m., and life slowly drips back into Summers' still frame. It starts in his face, a tired scowl pinched down, then moves to his arms and sore shoulder. It follows down his back into his legs, and on elbows, he starts to rise from the covers. A slow realization that he has no idea where he's at. The chess board in his head starts to play out, calm, smooth, and rational, as he takes in his foreign surroundings. He sees me in the corner, and his whole body tenses.

Before he can start his arguing and offense, I throw him his clothes and point to the bathroom. “You got a meeting in an hour,” I remind him. Still piecing together the night before, he looks down at the wrinkled clothes he's wearing. Though he doesn't say a word, his questions ring clear. “You got a good night's rest. That's all,” I soothe his sudden anxiety. A soft nod as he drags a hand through his tousled dark hair. “Shower, eat,” I say as I point to the sandwich and coffee, “See you at the meeting.”

Before I leave - an attempt to give him privacy - I clear my throat and gain his full attention. “I won't keep chasing you, Slim. If you want this, if you need this, even if it's just a good night's sleep, you're gonna have to come yourself. I won't keep forcing you.”
Midnight comes and goes, and with a dull ache in the center of my chest, I come to terms with the fact that Scott's not gonna show tonight. It's not often that I set my hopes high, having had them crushed one too many times, but this time, I was just about sure.

After another hour of grumbling and pining, I consider checking in on him, but I don't. He's a grown man, and I have to treat him like one. Door unlocked, I turn out the light and crawl into the empty bed that still smells like his aftershave.

Days pass into weeks, and I'm nothing more than another cog in the wheel of Utopia. Patrol duty, guard duty, help out here, assist over there. A never ending list of orders and commands. As much as I want to complain, as much I want to lock him in the Danger Room again, I don't. And, seeing her in diamond form again today, let's me know that Emma's not faring any better than me in dealin' with him.

“Everyone except you,” James Proudstar bellows, pounding his oversized fist against the wall. Screens shake overhead, and the entire table, save for Summers, looks at him with some surprise. “Every single one of us are pulling 8 hour patrols, here or on the mainland, except for you and Emma, Cyclops.”

“Now wait just a second,” Emma starts, her diamond form glistening, signalling a rise from her seat.

Scott settles her with a wave of his hand. “You're right,” he agrees, immediately diffusing Proudstar's waiting anger. I haven't been scheduling either one of us for patrols lately.” Horrified at what she's hearing, Emma turns to argue, but is met with another patient gesture. “However,” he concedes to her frustration as well, “Emma's needed here. As a telepath, I need her available for communication purposes at all times in case something happens. She can't communicate as easily if she's in the middle of a situation herself.”

Proudstar nods slowly in understanding. “What about you?” he pushes.

It's a reluctant compromise, but if it saves the implosion of his patrol roster, he's willing to make it. “Once a week,” he states calmly. “And, I hope you understand that I don't have time for anything more than that. I'll switch shifts – morning, afternoon, night.”

Namor huffs at the suggestion, disappointed that Summers actually gave into the ridiculous argument. Insults begin to form on the back of his tongue, but Scott is quick to change the subject.
“Back to entertainment,” he directs as Proudstar exits in a minor victory, and explains the procurement of the karaoke set-up as well as plans for building a small stage in the cafeteria for open mic nights. “So, if a couple of you would like to volunteer to keep it organized, that would be great.”

At first glance there are no takers, that is, until Rogue finally raises her hand. “Ah’m in,” she smiles, “and so is Elf.”

Kurt smiles brightly, his tail curling around Rogue's sleeved arm. “Of course, milady.” Plans continue to form, including a Dazzler-provided light show, snacks, a dance-off, etc. Relief eases across Scott's tensed features as Piotr and Betsy join in.

The meeting moves on to other business, including recent news of Osborne and a possible connection to the mecha-men we faced down a couple of weeks ago. Scott stresses that he's still working on details, but that we need to remain vigilant. With the X-Club on-screen, he discusses new security measures for both the island and the patrols heading out to SF. This, of course, leads to the compiling of new lists for tech and other supplies, as well as further arguments about under-staffing and too many obligations, a couple of barbs from Namor, and the soothing of minds over Storm's continued absence. “She has her own duties to fulfill in Wakanda,” Cyke explains, “but, she'll come if we need her.”

Meeting adjourned, Scott returns to his mountains of work, leaving the rest of us to carry on with assigned duties.

“We need glitter,” Rogue dreams into the silence as we make our way to the cafeteria.

Bobby wrinkles his nose. “For what?”

“Signs, dumby,” she smiles. “How else're people gonna know about karaoke night?” Bobby rolls his eyes, earning him a smack to the back of the head. “C'mon, you know you're itchin' to get up there and sing your heart out, Drake, just like the rest of us.”

In diamond form, Emma ignores them. Face cold, eyes ahead, she continues to walk. I pull her aside, hoping to calm her down, but she meets me with a hard, carbon stare that literally eats my words. Softening herself just enough to care, she pats me on the shoulder. “Don't back down.” Her voice is as clear and cold as her jeweled up eyes.
The evil plot thickens.

Chapter Notes

Alas, no ending yet, but maybe that's a good thing?

Screens flicker in the War Room, the low drone of canned laughter and neon applause. Eleven p.m., and Warren kicks his feet up on the table, trying not to fall asleep to the sounds of a late-night attempt at comedy.

“Where’s Cyke?” I question, plugging my com into the charger for the night.

“Patrol,” Warren yawns, seemingly glad for the interruption.

Warren pours me a cup of coffee and slides it across the table. “Rather have a beer,” I quip.

“So would I.”

I take a sip of the bitter black. It’s old, half burnt, but it’s still hot which is good considering I spent the last four hours of my patrol in the rain. “Didn't realize he was stationing coms again.”

“Temporary, I hope. There's not enough of us to go around to station everything 24/7.”

“Why'd he station tonight?”

Warren cracks his neck and shakes his head. A seriousness settles upon pale blue skin. “He got wind that there might be another bomb. It's unconfirmed, and he doesn't trust the source, but he wants someone in here just in case.”

“Who's on call?”

“Emma didn't tell you?” he asks, concerned as I shake my head. “Well, you, me, Remy, and Rogue. She really didn't tell you?” I shake my head again. “Wow, Cyke's gonna love that.”

“Ah,” I mutter and wave my hand. “I probably just forgot. I get so many damn orders throughout the day I can't tell whether I'm comin' or goin'.”

A silence settles between us, a silence that lasts through another pot of coffee, two more late night programs, and an internet search involving kittens in boxes. By three a.m., we're bored out of our minds and half-asleep. That's when the com-static hits.

A broken voice carries across the stutters in the com system. “Sam?” Warren replies instantly.
“Y-ccchhhhh.” Sam's voice cuts out again.

“You're cutting out, Sam. Repeat.” More static, a string of vowels and consonants that don't make sense. “Shit,” Warren curses under his breath. A fury of blue fingers against a keyboard, and Warren pulls up locators that mark the current whereabouts of the patrol. Another fury, and the comlinks blink red, a signal to Remy and Rogue that trouble's afoot.

A sheath of thick rain fogs vision and scent as we set down on the rooftop above the alley. The signs of battle are clearly evident – mech suits and burn marks, cracked walls, drops of blood. The every-so-often spark of static in our coms gives us hope that the patrol is still okay.

“You two stay high. Don't rely on coms to get us word,” Angel directs Ms. Southern Bell and the Cajun before he carries me to the ground on bladed wings. Rogue and Gambit run across the roof tops looking for any sign of the missing patrol.

I run my finger through a fresh streak of blood. “Proudstar,” I reveal and scour the ground for direction.

On guard, Warren and I follow the trail of crushed metal husks and the unconscious folks inside. He wants to take the time to bind them up so they don't double back on us, but I shake my head. If there's a bomb in play, we have to get there now.

A few blocks later, we come to the end of our little trail. The building looks to be a derelict office space, some stories high. Shattered windows and crude graffiti, splintered door, and the thick scent of mold. Rogue and Gambit approach from the opposite direction, fruitless in their search.

“But don't make sense,” Gambit says, barely audible through the rain and the sting of com static.

“What's de point of putting a bomb here?” It's a good question. “I'd say it was a lure. An easy way to pick off the patrol,” Warren speculates as he looks back over the trail of carnage.

Rogue's concern shows in arched brows and lowered jaw. “And Cyke walked right into it?”


“Wait,” Rogue stops him, “If he brought Psylocke, then why are we on coms?”

A rush of movement into the building, and Angel silently directs our teams in opposite directions. Gambit and Rogue go up, he and I go down. Com static breaks the silence. “Ge-sskch out of chsttt now,” Cyclops' command barely filters through. We make it through the door and across the street just as a muffled boom pushes up from the earth and brings the building down to its foundation. Clouds of dust pile up high, but that's it – no massive explosion, no broken pavement, barely even flung glass.

Up high, dangling from Warren’s arms, I watch as the dust of destruction settles down into the pit of the building's basement. “Head first, my ass,” I curse as Warren sets me down on the roof of the opposite building. I can't help but smile a little as I look down upon the brilliance. “He planned that.”

An explosion like that should have littered the surrounding area with all manner of destruction. Cracked enough pavement to hurt foundations in the surrounding blocks. Instead, the building caved in on itself, the aftermath perfectly centered upon an empty basement. I can just imagine that cocky bastard running through that building blasting away at support beams and basic structures to force the implosion, and man, that thought makes me hot.
“So, where is he?” Gambit intercedes before my mind can go any further down the rabbit hole, “And, if he's got dis handled, why call us?”

More good questions from the Cajun, ones that Warren can't even answer. “Cyclops?” Warren calls on com, but no answer. That's when worry settles again. “Cannonball?”

A com crackle answers, still nothin' but screwed up syllables that we can't understand. One building down a window shatters. A falling body, and another sudden implosion. We're quick to action.

Paige Guthrie -her current metallic form blackened from burns and dust - coughs as she crawls out from underneath the rubble. She's not mortally injured, but it's clear she's out of the fight. Cracks across metal skin reveal multiple broken bones and wounds. “Whole block's wired,” she manages as Warren pulls her to safety. “Mechs took off. Cyke figured it out.” She sheds her metallic form as she loses consciousness.

“He's sittin' the buildings on the bombs,” I breathe, keepin' as cool as I can before everyone starts to panic. “Tryin' to limit destruction.”

Warren agrees with a nod. “So, we start at the far end, work our way back, and meet in the middle. Don't kill supports completely, just enough to weaken them,” he reminds us as he stashes Husk safely away in a nearby building.

Another building goes down as I reach the far end of the block. “Sadie's gonna hate us for this,” I mumble to myself.

Starting on the first floor, I run through the building tearing up supports. I'm not a mad genius at spatial geometry like Cyke, but I've torn up enough buildings in my day to know how to collapse one. Static. “Thr-cchhh...sec...” I hear One-eye's voice over the com, followed by an “Out,” from Sam. The slight shake of earth as another building goes down.

“Wh-ccshhh at Wolv-sssst?” Scott speaks through static.

“Last building on right.” At least he'll give me a time frame.

“Twe-ccshhh min-skkkk.”

Through barely understood syllables, we all manage to report and receive our not-nearly-enough-time-to-get-this-shit-done orders. By the time I finish with my building, two more buildings have gone down, and I make it just in time to see Cyke enter the building beside mine. “Eight minutes. First floors.” he yells through the distance and disappears.

I can hear the electric buzz of concussion beams several floors above me followed by the pounding of fast steps. I work my way through the first floor, and hit the stairs to the second. “Out,” he yells at me. Then, into the com, “Cannonball, evacuate.”

No sooner do we hit the street than Sam's flaming ass comets through the sky, and the building falls to pieces behind him. Cyke points to the building across the street, out of breath, but still in full control. “Five minutes, Cannonball!”

Without hesitation, Cannonball bursts into the building and begins his path of destruction. Cyclops runs two buildings up with me on his heels, but he stops me mid stride and points to the end of the street. “Warren's building. Seven minutes.”

Which, if things are timing the way I think they're timing, he's got three minutes to get in and get out before his building goes down in flames. My hesitation to listen to him earns a dark red stare that
takes precious time, so I bite my tongue and obey.

Over the com, Gambit, Rogue, Angel, and Cannonball give all clears, each met with the chaotic noise of broken com. As I rush out of the building, a countdown plays in the back of my mind. Forty-five seconds left, and Scott's still flashin' beams. He's miscalculated or overcompensated, one or the other, either way, he's not makin' it out on time. “Cannonball, get him outta there.”

Unlike me, Sam doesn't argue. Powered up, he jets from the ground and crashes through the windows, taking part of a wall with him. He crashes through the other side, just as the building erupts. Unlike the others, this one actually makes a mess. Glass and bricks and concrete floors fly through the air. Half-charred wood and tiles, rotten furniture, and bits of roof skid across the roadway. We shield ourselves from the explosion, but, it could have been far worse.

Winded, wounded, and damn tired, Scott thanks Cannonball for the save. I can tell by the way he's standing that he's got at least one broken bone in his arm and three more cracked ribs. His uniform's in bloody tatters, and his visor frame's cracked over swollen eye and cheekbone. “Where's Husk?”


Scott doesn't question it. Rogue does. Scott speaks. “Pyslocke's been out of communication for about an hour. Warpath's tracking her, but with the rain, I'm not sure he can get through. We split into teams, southwest, south, and southeast. First sign of Warpath or mechs - I don't care how much static there is, keep speaking until spoken to.”

It takes a little over twenty minutes for Warren and I to pick up on Proudstar's trail. A few crushed mech suits, a banged up car, and the trail of blood. I call over the intercom letting the teams know of our location, and after a few tries, I finally get an answer back.

As we all settle in on the agreed location, Rogue's irritation comes to the front. “We can't just leave Husk in a building and hope she's okay. If you don't -”

“Fine,” Scott snaps, his temper palpable. “Go.” He takes a deep breath as she flies off, but his attitude doesn't ease. “Anyone else?” Once again, he's in pain and on the verge of failure.

James Proudstar is aware of our approach long before we arrive. He waits for us outside rows of storage buildings near to the edge of SF proper. A deep gash in the back of his leg has him standing funny, but otherwise he looks okay. “Two dozen mechs,” he surmises.

“Psylocke?” Warren asks.

“Last unit on the left as of ten minutes ago. She's still out cold from whatever they hit her with.”

“Gas guns,” Sam explains.

“Three of them,” Warpath points out.

Scott takes a deep breath and surveys the scene. “First priority is to take out the guns. I want one whole to figure out what's in it. Wolverine, that's on you. Cannonball, you lead the mechs over there,” he says pointing to the upper right corner of the facility, “where Warpath and I will be waiting. Gambit, get in that unit and get Psylocke, and Angel, they're going to figure this out quickly, so you watch his back.”

Sam waits until Cyke and Warpath are in position before he busts out the flames and zigzags across the facility. As soon as mechs start running, I jump in targetting gas guns. Angel flies overhead, Gambit sneaks through shadows.
{

"Thing I hate most about chemicals is the smell. Now, there's some smells I like – like beer and aftershave – but when that acrid, paint thinner, floor cleaner shit hits the air, it just pisses me off. What pisses me off more is the stupid donkey who thinks that this chemical shit is the be-all and end-all of perfect weapons. He obviously ain't heard o' me.

One well angled slice and the dumb ass loses three fingers and his anal restraint. A punch to the gas mask on his face, and the man falls backward, puncturing the gas chamber on his back. Whoops. Down one gun.

Quickly, I hunt down the second gun, spot him somewhere near a bunch o' blinkin' lights that are probably calling for reinforcements. He sees me comin' before I can hit my stride, and takes off running towards where Gambit and Angel are breakin' Psylocke free. A glance in their direction proves Cyke's inclination towards caution right, as Angel's fighting three of the mechs.

Loaded down with a mask and a gas gun, my little runner doesn't make it too far before I tackle him. A mistimed claw breaks another gas chamber. One chance left to get a clean gun, and no idea where the little rat's gotten off too. Unfortunately, this second dose of gas gives my head the spins. Thank beer for the healin' factor.

Ignoring the battle down at the end, I put my efforts into finding the third and final gun, and cross my fingers that this time I take it right. From the commotion at the top of the facility, I suspicion that he's trying to put his gun to use on taking out Sam, James, and Scott.

“One gun left,” I speak into my com as I run towards them. “Need a clean one.” No answer, but I don't expect one right now.

I spot the little guy standing at the battle's edge, his gas gun pointed towards James. “Warpath!” I yell, but he doesn't hear me. A spray of chemicals in the air, their noxious smell tainting the air. James continues to fight the six mechs on top of him, but he quickly starts to stumble. Guy pulls his trigger again, and James falls to the ground, earning him vengeful kicks by the busted up mechs.

The whole lot of them head further up the side of the facility where Scott's knockin' back mechs with the flash of his eyes. Unwilling to use a full powered blast on the human's inside, he sticks to demolishing joints and circuitry. Unable to roll, flip, and dodge due to broken bones, he takes a direct hit to his jaw which knocks him flat.

I make it just in time to stop the twerp with the gun, slicing the straps of his chamber before I do any real damage, and finally taking a gun clean. “Down!” I hear a short distance behind me, as Cyclops, on his feet again, blasts a mech before it can jumble my brains. “Knees, left neck, back right shoulder,” he yells again – the easiest way to dismantle these suckers.

Two claws, four swipes, and two minutes thirty eight seconds, one mech down. Next one doesn't go down so easy. This one knows what to guard, and takes every spot of damage he can to keep his little suit movin'. Doesn't help that two of his friends join in, but that just means more fight to go around.

Gambit finally shows, lending some well played cards to the battle, and between him and Sam, half the facility is on fire. Chaos ensues. Five minutes later, Scott calls retreat. It pisses me off at first, but a glance at a barely-standin' Cyclops starin' at the sky, and I get why. Three helicopters approach. Yeah, retreat's the better option.

}
Slim's a lousy patient, especially when head table's about to meet in ten minutes. Against Rao's advice, he eschews well-needed rest and recovery, and hobbles his half-broken ass up the stairs.

By the time he reaches the War Room, he's fifteen minutes late, an occurrence that would buy anyone else a tongue lashing, but for him it only raises doubts and concerns. Rogue avoids his ruby gaze as he takes his seat at the head of the table. He frowns when he notices that Emma is still diamond.

Complaints, needs, supply issues, all normal procedures are addressed before he allows discussion of last night's failed patrol and the controlled destruction of a whole city block. Mayor Sinclair and the X-Club listen in on screens.

“We couldn't disarm them,” he explains calmly to Sinclair. “This was a well planned attack. They poured concrete over the wires and half the payload.”

“Couldn't you have busted the concrete?” she questions, obviously having no idea about how bombs work.

Scott shakes his head. “We limited destruction as best we could.”

“You destroyed twelve buildings!” she argues, her hawkish features growing red and angry.

“Empty buildings,” he reminds her, unphased by her temper. “It was either that, or complete decimation in a two mile surround.”

The figure stuns her to silence. Unhappy, she nods. “I'm expecting initial reports from the fire chief and bomb squad within the next couple of hours.”

“And, I'm sure they'll agree with everything I just said,” he replies with cold confidence. “Sadie, I promise you, there was no other way. Call me when you get the reports.” Her screen goes blank lending a bit of tension to the air.

He switches attention to the X-club. “Betsy and James are still down and I want to know why. I want that gas analyzed and neutralized. I want a full report by the end of the day.”

Nemesis chuckles in his arrogance. “You sure want a lot.”
“I’ll be wanting more once Sadie gets back to me with her initial reports. Once their investigative crews clear the area, I want you and Henry on the ground to gather your own reports. I want to know payload, mechanisms, and a way to short circuit those things before this gets worse.”

Then to the head table. “I’m still working on connecting the mechs to Osborne, or figure out the end goal for all of this, so any comments are appreciated.”

Namor smiles. “Your woman has been diamond for weeks. If you insist on ignoring the problems in your own bedroom—”

Scott slams a fist onto the table before chaos can erupt. “What makes you think that this Osborne situation doesn’t involve you, Namor?”

Before the quick-tempered fish-king can offer up an Imperius Rex in retaliation, Scott speaks again, his words slow, dark and eerily calm. “All the arrogance in the world won’t save you and your people if Utopia falls. We’re the last of your allies, the last people in the world you haven’t pissed off to the point of breaking your neck. You need us because without us, your kingdom’s dead in the water.”

Wide-eyed silence. Half the table is ready to duck and run, the other half is too stunned to move. Namor’s eyes squint real tight, like fingernail tips, his teeth grate behind closed lips. He locks Scott in an antler-challenge-stare-down, and even though the tension turns Namor five shades of red, Slim doesn’t even flinch. “You’ve got balls, boy,” Namor says at last. “I respect that.” Audible exhales all around the table, save for Slim who didn’t inhale once.

“Good,” he replies evenly, “I need you on the docks.”

Scott shares the details of new recon missions in hopes of finally figuring out what Osborne’s up to. The meeting ends in the quiet absorption of the uphill battle we’re still climbing.

“Emma,” Scott says quietly as people exit, “I need my main telepath back.”

Emma balls her hands into angry diamond fists. “Screw you, Scott.” The tap o’ high heels in the hallway finally fades.

Scott chokes down the hard lump of not-yet-repressed stuck in his throat and lets loose a shaky breath.

“Slim,” I say quietly, knowing I’m just addin’ more pressure to the world he’s carrying, “You need to get back down to med bay before those ribs puncture a lung.”

“I will,” he sighs. “Just let me get caught up here.”
Chapter Summary

In trouble?!?

Chapter Notes

And the tale just spins and spins....

Scott answers my patrol clearance, which lets me know that he didn't make it down to Med Bay as promised. Kurt notices my apprehension as we board the boat back to the island. Nori and Rogue climb in behind us, both a mirror of my own agitation, though for different reasons.

“He's an asshole,” Nori gripes looking sideways at Rogue. “Always was, always will be.”

Rogue nods, though with some measure of guilt. “Ah just couldn't stand Paige bein' left in some buildin' s'all. Ah mean, if one of them mechs came back and --”

Kurt stops her with a rare show of bluntness. “Defend your actions to Scott, not us.”

“So, you agree with leaving an unconscious girl in an abandoned building?” Nori counters. “Rogue has every right to be pissed at that self-righteous ass.”

“Agree or not agree isn't the point,” Kurt argues, “Take the matter up with Scott.”

“Ah tried after you left, but he was so busy that...” Rogue's words trail off into nothingness. Having been on the wrong end of Scott's temper many times in the past, I get her worry.

“Relax, darlin’” I soothe, “If you were in that much trouble, he'd a let you know.”

Nori groans. “She shouldn't be in trouble at all!”

“She doesn't even know if she is in trouble,” Kurt sighs with a palm to his forehead. “That's why I'm saying to talk to him before this all gets blown out of proportion!” A deep breath and a mischievous smile. “In trouble. It sounds like he will take away her toys, no?”

“Or her dessert.” I play along. Elf's good at lifting spirits.

“Her driving privileges.”

“For at least a year.”

“Oh, I don't know, just a year?” Kurt ponders playfully, a wide agile finger knuckled under his chin. “Maybe two. And no TV after supper.”

A sweet smile spreads across Rogue's face as we continue to chat away about her being in trouble.
“Okay, okay, ah get it. Man up, talk to Scott, get over it.”

“My advice?” Rogue nods at my askance. “Agree to disagree. He'll get over it. You had good reason to be worried about Paige. But, in his head, havin' you with the team coulda got Bets outta there faster, and saved James and Warren a good bit o' hurt.”

“And himself,” Kurt interjects.

“Nah, man's a mule when it comes to his own scrapes. Right now, I'd say he's worried about patrols bein' three people down right in the middle of Osborne's big plot.”

Concern draws Rogue's eyes down and tilts her head to the right. “Think he's gonna ask Emma?”

I nod. “I think he's gonna have to, 'specially since she's not bein' a telepath right now.”

“About time that lazy.”

“Shut it, Nori.” Nori looks at me with blue fire in her eyes, but quickly realizes she's outmatched – her youthful rebellion is nothin' compared to my lived-a-hundred-years-and-still-kickin'-it-to-the-man type o' anarchy.

“Which reminds me,” Kurt says with a twinkle in his eye, “Noriko, you will meet me in the Danger Room at seven a.m. sharp in the morning.”

Nori blinks twice. “What?”

“You're back in training,” he sings with a wink.

“Says who?” she argues.

“Me!” A brief pause as he considers whether or not he'll take total blame for waking an angry teen up at the butt-crack of dawn. He decides he's not that much of a risk taker, adding quickly, “And Cyclops.”
Chapter Summary

An entire race trapped on a fallen asteroid = loads of drama.

Chapter Notes

Hopefully, some excitement will ease the wait?

It's the noise that stops me. This time o' night, Utopia should be fadin' off to sleep, kickin' down deep into covers and hopin' for a better tomorrow. Early to bed, early to rise, unless you're either One-eye or on night duty. Ear tilted into ocean wind, I hold my arm out to stop Kurt, Rogue, and Nori from going further. “Something's wrong,” I warn them.

As we close the distance from dock to door, the cacophony and worry only grow louder. I can hear the stampede within the walls, the shouting and yelling. I open the door to a full fledged riot. “Save the food stores!” Petey – his skin glistenin' steel – yells from the sidewall as he tries to stop Toad, Avalanche and a few others from breaking into the water storage. “Rogue!” I yell and point. She immediately jumps into the fray knocking Avalanche back several feet, while the rest of us push up further into the chaos.

I ain't as good as Cyke at makin' like a pickle, and I'm sure that grabbing Noriko by both shoulders doesn't help, but the girl don't like commands, so I gotta make her listen. “Med Bay, now!” She wrinkles her nose in argument anyway. Yeah, teenagers. “Reyes and Rao aren't fighters, kid. Someone goes after all those meds, then -” Hit her with logic and she speeds off without hesitation. Heh. Who woulda thunk.

To Kurt. “'Port up to the War Room. Tell me what's happenin'.”

As I make my way through the halls - breaking up as many knock down drag outs as I can, puttin' out fires, and stoppin' Erg from destroying our entire power grid - Kurt finally makes his way back. “War Room's empty,” he heaves out of breath. I nod, figuring as much.

Food storage is two halls over, and already Elf and I know that we're in over our heads. Wouldn't be so bad if I could just gut the two dozen or so mutants banging on the walls and doors trying to break past Angel, Iceman, and Dani Moonstar, but I can't, and that pisses me off.

Arclight spreads her hands, ready to break defenses once and for all, but Kurt – bless him – has the fucking genius idea to grab her first. A single bamf, and Arc disappears, leaving Fever Pitch to take her place as angry-as-hell-and-not-taking-it-anymore impromptu leader.

Warren's wings spread wide to buffer the billowing flames, and Drake pours on the ice. Steam pockets up from the barrage, searing skin and making the whole fight even more complicated 'cause now no one can see. Dani shrieks and is suddenly thrown from the battle. She skids down the hall on her back, and when she rises, she's all kindsa pissed. Bloody nose, swollen jaw, she channels her
Valkyrie rage and throws herself back into the steamed-up mess of a fight over rice, beans, and Spam.

“Hellion!” she yells, a guttural rage.

A part o’ me wants to just sit back and watch the circus, but the thick scent of sulfur and brimstone pulls me back to purpose. I follow Nightcrawler’s lead into the fog.

It doesn’t take long after that before the fight for couscous and canned peas starts winding down. Out of breath, still aching from the beating he took from the mechs, Warren grabs my arm. “Common Room,” he directs, “I think that’s—” he takes a punch to the jaw from Changeling. Blue lips spread into an angry snarl, a dangerous growl from the bottom of his throat, and Angel's back in the fight. Kurt follows suit.

A wrestlin' match, a hair pullin' contest, and three hallways later, I end up at the door to the Common Room. Fightin' in here is worse than out there, or at least that's what I assume when I hear the chants for 'Fight, fight, fight.” Bloodlust and pent up aggression, primal yells and cruel laughter. Crumpled up bills exchange hands, and the sound of shattered glass. “I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” A choked up voice hedges it's way between the concert of hoots and hollers.

Petey – still wearin' steel – skips half the stairs on the other side o' the room, and starts pushin' his way through. I do the same, though without the same success. A good bit shorter than most o’ the crowd, I still have no idea what's going on. “I hope you fucking die, you fucking asshole!” Maybe it's’ cause o’ the look on Petey's face – the only face I can really see – but it finally dawns on me that it's Emma doin' the yelling.

I see all kindsa things being handed up through the crowd – mugs, forks, rocks, brooms. I see Pete in a stand-off with Santo, stalling his progress forward, and see the breaking of overhead shelves in the sink alcove. Cans and bottles, radios, and all else come tumbling down garnering a roar of cheers from the crowd. “You go, girl!” Bling whoots from behind me.

“I stood by you!” The shattering of glass. “I gave you everything I had! And you do this to me?!”

At the front of the frey, I see several struggles – those tryin' to hold the White Queen back, and those tryin' to let Emma continue her tirade. Armor – little Misako – grabs hold of Emma's waist and tries to pull her away from it all, but Magma intercedes, adding a little heat to things. She twists Armor to the ground, daring her to stand up again.

A few feet away, surrounded by wreckage and broken things, Cyclops keeps himself upright with one hand on the small sink counter and his shoulder against the fridge. A chair, part of a table, a broken radio, a handful of knives, rocks, and busted up cans of peaches litter the area around him. Face as still as ever, red lenses focused solely on his diamond girlfriend, he moves just enough to avoid being pummeled by another volley of stones and forks proffered from the crowd. “I'm sorry, Emma,” he mouths quietly, only to receive an anguished yell and a barely-ducked army boot in return.

“He broke up with her,” the Cuckoos say in unison beside me, their faces registering enjoyment. In a simultaneous movement, the girls' blue eyes turn to look at me. Smiles snip the edges of their cheeks.

“What?”

“Two weeks ago,” they say, returning their focus to the fight at hand. “Tonight he put her on patrol. She wants payback. Boys are such trouble.” I wonder how much of this madness these three are causing.
“You said you needed me!” Emma screams, making another rush for Scott. Dazzler, just now coming back to consciousness, grabs her leg, and Diamond goes crashing to the ground. A deft kick to the teeth, and Dazzler rolls over in pain. Quicker than I imagined, Emma's on her feet. Someone hands her another stone. “You fucking liar!” she cries, throws the rock, and rushes again.

Petey breaks free of Rockslide and grabs Emma's diamond waist just seconds before she can reach One-eye. “Liar!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” she screams at the top of her lungs as Colossus tries to subdue her. Bling and Magma come to her rescue.

As more things fly through the air, Scott barely moves, but the way he stands there, one could easily forget that he's got a bazillion broken ribs, a broken arm, and who knows what else. His breath comes in starts and stops. “Emma,” he tries, his baritone soft, “I need you on patrol.”

A flurry of diamond against steel, and Emma breaks free of Colossus' grip and rushes at him again. She doesn't get far before she meets my adamantium skeleton. Em falls flat on her ass and looks up at me with wide, heartfelt eyes. Even in diamond form, the depth of her emotions play out over her face – going from shock to sadness to guilt to shame.

“Y'all done lost your marbles,” I hear Rogue say at the back of the room.

The crowd goes quiet, their zealous need for a fight dimmed as Rogue joins me and Petey at the front of the room forming a heavy-hitting barrier between Utopia and its not-doin'-so-great leader. But, heat like that don't stay down too long, and a cry from the crowd riles everyone up again. Surprising to us all, it's Pixie who makes the next move. In a quick, lock-twist-throw, she puts one of the Cuckoos on the floor and dares the other two to take their chances. Calls for blood, and the butterfly's suddenly a nervous wreck. Thankfully, Ali's still around, and the other two hit the floor like piles o' gym clothes. Some part of the madness fades with them.

“Now, ya'll be good little bunnies and get back to your rooms,” Rogue calls over the crowd, “and we'll sort all this out in a bit.” To emphasize the meaning behind her sweet southern drawl, she packs a fist against her hand. The crowd obeys.

As Rogue directs further attempts to quell the island-wide riot, I turn to Scott. Red lenses stay focused on the now-flesh form of Emma Frost wailing for her broken heart. Tears streak her face with the pale colors of her makeup and black mascara. She cries for her never-was-lover as Dazzler helps her from the floor. Half-way down the hall, her broken sobs can still be heard. Scott swallows and clenches his jaw even tighter.

He wants to focus, to clean up the mess left behind by the telepathic aided insanity. His hand reaches for a broom, but I snatch the broom away. “Let's get you to Med Bay,” I say quietly, trying to take his weight. He twists awkwardly as I try to aid his balance, then a look of pure shock on his face. His jaw flies open, hand reaches for the top of his ribs, and a desperate, dry breath. Brows rocket upward in as close to fear as I've ever seen, and another attempt at ragged breath. His body lurches forward, face goes red and purple, the tension in his hands fade. “Shit!” I hiss, and keep him from hitting the floor face first.

Panic sends a surge of adrenaline through my tired muscles, and I force him flat to the ground not sure what the hell just happened. Rasped breath painfully raises against his chest. Half unconscious through lack of air, he manages to eek out, “Lung.”

“Petey!” I yell.

Like something out of a video game, I'm out front, claws a-swinging, darin' the fools still stupid enough to be fightin' to get in my way. A step or two behind me is Piotr trying to keep Scott flat
enough so ribs don't make more of a problem for his already collapsed lung. It's a long run down to Med Bay. “Remind me to tell that dumb ass to put in an elevator,” I grumble as Pete and I hit the steps.

Slim's lips are as blue as Kurt's by the time we get him into a bed. A quick call to Reyes, and buttons start flyin' as she rips his shirt in half. Iodine down, a quick jab with a needle, and a faint whistle as her steady hand pulls back the plunger sippin' the fluid from his lungs. Scott's breath comes back with a bang at first, and slowly settles into a less-desperate flow. She pulls a mask over his mouth and nose, tapes his eyes shut for protection, and takes a deep breath.

Casting a glance over her shoulder, she nods at a room full of other patients waiting to be tended. “You guys wouldn't mind sticking around for a bit, would you?”

It's three o'clock in the mornin' before Pete and I finally make our way back upstairs. The glaring madness of the riot meets us at every turn. Warren rousts a fight-drowsy Hepzibah from the floor and issues her off to bed. “What a mess,” he half-sighs, half laughs. “How's Scott?”

“She's survivin’” is about the only word I can come up with. Warren nods.

“Ororo's going to be pissed as hell,” he reveals with a bit of trepidation.

“You called her?” I ask, surprised at his gumption.

He shakes his weary head. “Scott did. Sometime this morning. I was in the middle of talking to her when all this started.”

“What the hell happened, anyway?”

Pete kicks a broken bottle across the floor. The screech of glass against metal as it skids down the hall. “Emma was not happy with the new patrol roster, and was not shy about letting people know.”

“Did you know they'd broken up?” Warren asks me.

“Nope.”

“Did anyone know?” His question gets shrugs from both me and Pete. I gesture for the story-telling to continue. Warren sighs. “All I know is Hellion was standing on a cafeteria table calling for an end to tyranny and world-hunger. Man, that kid can speak. He should be a lawyer.”

“Before we knew it,” Pete offers in his gentle tone, “the whole place was in chaos, and Scott was trapped in the Common Room with Emma and the Cuckoos. He told us to protect the stores, so that's what we did.”

“He thought he could handle Emma, right?” Warren gestures ignorance, Pete nods. A tired laugh shakes my shoulders. “One shit storm after another anymore.”

“Can't wait to see what he gets us into next,” Warren cracks with his own blend of exhaustion and irony.
XVII

Chapter Summary

A moment of distrust.

Chapter Notes

Goodness - hope someone still tagging along on this tale. I promise, it'll all come together in the end.

Storm sits at Scott's bedside, her hands folded gracefully in her lap, blue eyes focused and calm. A quiet, tense conversation. Behind the oxygen mask, Scott's words are muffled, his voice weak, and his eyes still taped shut from the night before. He squirms himself into a half seated position, knocking free blankets, to reveal the heavy coating of plaster and bandages around his ribs and chest. He knocks at tubes and wires with his arm cast, and struggles to move his swollen, braced knee. Half his back is nothing but one big, blue-black bruise, and stitches down thigh and over his stomach start to pop with movement.

Machines beep, alerting Rao that her patient is on the move. Her age and demeanor disguise the swiftness of her actions. “I will flood your system with pain killers,” she warns him, “and keep you under until you're healed.” Knowing she's serious, he settles back down.

Scott reaches for Ororo's hand. “Please,” he begs, fighting against exhaustion to stay awake and alert long enough to get Storm's agreement.

“Scott,” she chides gently, “we need him right now.”

“I don't trust him.”

“Regardless,” she says in that regal tone that can freeze a man's blood, “after last night -”

“Storm, please.”

Storm doesn't waver. “Rest, Scott. Let me handle this.” Unwilling to argue any further, she exits the room, giving me a frustrated grin on her way.

It's strange to see his face like this -unshielded by visors or glasses - and it reminds me how much emotion the eyes can hold, even eyes taped shut. Scott flails a hand across the side table in search of his ruby red lenses, but a tsk-tsk-tsk from Rao brings him to heel.

High cheekbone swollen and salved, a dastardly cut above his eye, another down his jaw – they don't stop the sweep of frustration from pinching up his face and drawing taped eyes down real tight. He presses busted lip into perfect white teeth, and takes a deep breath. He's plannin' his escape.

I chuckle softly, just loud enough so he knows I'm here and doesn't jump out of his skin. “Morphine might do ya some good right now, Slim.”
Eyelids smooth with some measure of hope. “Logan?”

“Scotty.”

“Xavier,” he breathes. “He's going to knock us off track.”

“No,” I interject, “You did that last night.”

A low blow, yeah, I know. I regret it instantly. Slim's features tense up once more, clenching rock jaw and creasing dark brow. In a sudden moment of determination, Scott pushes himself up from the bed, ripping tubes out of his arms, and pulling machines down with him. “Osborne -” he seethes through clenched teeth and top-notch pain. The heaviness of the oxygen machine destroys his upward momentum, and instead of standing upright, Scott Summers tumbles down to the floor, half-choked from his exertion.

Pain rockets down spine as his body is pulled up and down at the same time, knees hit the floor, arm bangs against the bed, and as the air machine rocks back onto its legs, it pulls Scott's head with it, banging it against the bedframe, and him unconscious. Rao rolls her eyes.
Chapter Summary

The best intentions don't always mean the best plans.

Chapter Notes

Oh, don't go yet... I promise, I promise, one day it will end.

****aequorin is what makes a jellyfish glow
****sodium pentathol is sometimes called a truth serum
****fentanyl is also known as zombie drug

A quick report from Nemesis about the gas. Some mix of aequorin, sodium pentathol, fentanyl and a whole bunch o’ other stuff that I don't know jack about. “The thing that worries me is motivation rather than substance,” Nemesis says, adjusting his screen so he can see the head table better. “These are liquid chemicals, not gasses, and in gas form, they lack a certain potency.”

“Betsy and James?” Storm asks, concern smoothing across her dark brows.

“They'll be fine,” Nemesis says without compassion. “The gas is what has me concerned -”

“Thank you, Dr. Nemesis,” Charles Xavier interrupts. “Your analysis is appreciated.” After a nodded gesture, Ororo turns off the X-Club screen.

Xavier sits at the head table, his keen eyes meeting everyone in the room as he speaks. Namor is not enthralled. From Xavier's mouth flows words of peace and the need for rest. These are flowered words; soft, sweet petals that deny the utter danger that waits for us just around the corner. Still, there's not much I can do.

It takes little time for patrol lists to be re-rendered, dropping off the second patrol of the city, relying on security instead of island patrol, and reneging on plans to figure out Osborne before the plot comes to fruition. But, this is Xavier at his finest: pacifism before action, defend only when needed. Forgiveness before violence, soul before all else. It's a pretty dream, and one that, in my heart, I still wish for. Xavier's world is a safe one, built on the idea that violence begets violence, and pro-action is provocation. Mutants must stand above the fray to prove that they are not a threat.

He turns his attention to food supplies, deciding that there's enough in store to allow a few extra snacks throughout the day. Cerebra duty, com duty, recon missions, yada yada, Xavier strips away nearly half of the strict control Summers has put on us since moving us here.

By the end of the meeting, we've got three days off a week, daily trips to the mainland, and the promise of new furniture in exchange for cleaning up after the riot. No mention of Osborne, no mention of still-out-there mutants, no mention of anything other than peace and dreams.
I'm not the only one to have well-placed concerns about these sweeping changes. Kurt, Warren, Betsy, Rogue, and myself meet up about an hour later. Unfortunately, there's little we can do save for hope that this attempt to shift morale doesn't play right into Scott's fears.

“It's the right thing to do,” Storm says with regal resolve as she tries to figure out the mass of paperwork Scott's left in his injured wake. Fruitless as the rest of us, she sighs and tosses the papers across the table.

“What about Osborne?” I remind her.

With a deep sigh, she says, “Xavier thinks the threat will die down if we stop engaging in the situation. Cyclops has already moved mutants off U.S. soil, so Osborne should have no further reason to -”

“He grabbed Bets and put her in a storage unit.” My voice is purposefully measured as 'Ro's reaction to threats usually involve lightning and hurricanes. She shakes her head in frustration, long white hair feathering across dark skin. “You need to talk to Scott.”

“Scott needs rest,” she urges. “I can handle this.”

“Xavier can handle this, you mean.”

“I'll let him handle the meetings until I get things figured out.”

The chuckle that hits my throat is little more than a series of grunts and gargles. “Ain't no one but One-eye gonna figure this shit out.” I spread my hands across piles of paperwork, messin' it about until it fills up the entire table. “You're good, 'Ro, but you ain't been here.”

“I'm a queen,” she speaks, her tone as dark as her skin. “I understand the concept of ruling.”

“A wealthy, peaceful country not on the edge of extinction, sure,” I inject my own darkness. “But, what Scott's been dealin' with, and what Chuck just dismantled in less than hour? It ain't the same, darlin’.”

“Then I'll make it the same.” All entitlement and due airs, she plugs herself back into the messed up papers on the table.

I fully intend to talk to Summers about the meeting, but diamond Emma has beaten me to the punch. Half-drugged on whatever Rao is flooding through his veins, his lackadaisical hands grab at the papers she hands to him. Red lenses sway to the right as he tries to focus on her, nods and grunts as she discusses what happened at the meeting. She lifts his head so he can see the meeting notes and revised schedules. The content mangles his his face – his lack of stoicism being a product of his pain-killed state.

“Patrols... go back...” he tries through the mix of drugs in his system. Emma nods, her concern overshadowed by her sense of duty.

“Osborne?” she says, which garners an animalistic snarl from Scott. “All recon missions were cancelled.”

“Re...sta...”


“Ship... two weeks.” He tries to hold up two fingers, but fails miserably.
“Food shipment in two weeks?” she attempts to clarify.

A lazy hand waves at the IV drip hooked into his arm. “Drugs. No.”

“Oh, Scott, no, no, no,” she purrs with sincere sympathy, “you need those.”

He looks so pitiful, trying to fight the chemicals in his blood. Jaw hinges open and half-shut like a fish as he searches his dizzy brain for words. Lazy hand misses an attempt at straightening crooked red lenses across the bridge of his nose. He leans his head into the pillow for a moment, lost to morphine glaze before bouncing back with a series of forgotten breaths and stuttered syllables. He licks his lips and starts again, only to fail miserably.

“Rao dosed him up good,” I say quietly as Scott Summers loses himself to a pain-killed haze. Emma nods, her diamond form nothing but business at the moment.

“They performed surgery this morning. Apparently, his lung collapsed again.”

“Yet, you're here to get him back to work.”

An annoyed sigh. She inspects diamond nails – her way of brushing me off. “Trying to stop the train wreck before it starts.” Her stool screeches across the metal floor. She leaves the room as cold as she came into it.

It's my turn. Pushing the stool up to the side of the bed, I take a wide-legged sit and glance over the multiple machines he's hooked up to before looking down at him. Drug hazed, knowing there's no possible way he can run, I graze my fingers through the edge of dark hair. He reacts with a barely intoned sigh. “Logan.”

His heart beats faster – getting a stern look from both Reyes and Rao – as I tender my fingers down the side of his jaw. A soft moan. A barely-there smile raises the edge of one cheek, and with heavy breath he opens his neck for me.

Oh, but if I could. In drug haze, his breath becomes heavy and sweet, a slice of vanilla cake with icing on top. Tongue darts across his lips, open, waiting, hoping. His neck stretches further hoping I take the bait. Heart beat rises, a glimmer of dreamy sweat licks across the edge of his hairline. I choke on my disbelief when the musked scent of arousal hits me like a brick. “Logan,” he says again softly before disappearing to dreams for the night.

Yeah, it's shower time.

A day later, three o'clock in the freakin' morning, red alarms flash across the entire island. In a start, I jump to attention, pulling on whatever clothes I find on the floor. Still zipping up my jeans, I barge through my door, to see Kurt and a dozen others doing the same. Bare feet slap against metal floor as we run through the halls.

Storm – dressed in night clothes herself - stands front and center of the War-Room crowd. All 198 of us tryin' to take a gander at whatever has set Her Highness to worry. Screens flash, a sprawl of news reports as she speaks. “Thirty minutes ago,” she begins, “San Francisco was attacked.”

As she sets forth details of the reports that come across the television channels, we learn that three separate detonation sites have been reported thus far, and more are expected. She outlines the formations of more than a dozen teams to stop further damage. By her side, Xavier watches the destruction on screens far above his head, gnawed by the realization that he was wrong.

“We need to tell Scott,” Warren argues as the first of the teams exit to prepare themselves for
departure.

“Scott needs rest,” Xavier tries to soothe.

Warren’s patience is not nearly as devout as 'Ro's or Scott's, and when it breaks, he grabs Xavier by the collar. “We tell Scott.”

A quick telepathic com, and Emma halts the departing teams. Everyone stands motionless waiting to hear what happens next. A handful of reports gathered in diamond hand, a group of us stand beside her in Med Bay.

It's Rogue who wakes Scott up, and Ali who pulls the plug on his morphine drip. Bobby ices up sleepy skin until Scott's body jerks to reality. As pain settles in, leader-mode returns, reports are given, papers handed over. Pixie gives him a tablet displaying the latest news report. Still half-under, Scott – with Emma's telepathic help – starts barking orders.

“Namor,” he speaks into empty air, his lingering drug haze not yet accepting mind-speak, “you and your people at the docks. Stop any ship that comes in. Storm call traffic control, find alternate landing sights. Flyers, send planes and anything else to alternate destinations. Tough skins and healing factors – except for Wolverine – hit the blazes get them out. Telepaths keep people evacuating to the edges of the city, calm controlled order. Trackers, find the bombs. Wolverine heads mech patrol with the following teams...”

The commands keep flowing until Scott finally has every single person on Utopia flying out at breakneck speed, with a small contingent left to protect the island just in case. “I'll keep telepathic contact,” Emma reminds everyone, “so keep your thoughts clean, focused, and on the task at hand.”

Proudstar reports a bomb about 15 minutes west of the courthouse. Scott talks Armor through disarming it. Hepzibah discovers a second bomb at an art museum. Disarmed by Dust. A small squad of mechs is taken down by Rogue, Karma, Toad, and Hellion. Another by me, Husk, Nightcrawler, and Gentle.

As actions pile on actions, Emma’s Cuckoos bring a white board into the room to help Cyclops keep track of the current situations. Bombs get disarmed, mechs get taken down. No one whines, no one complains as Scott drives us forward into defeating this latest threat. By eight o’clock in the morning, just as the sun turns the sky the color of candy apples and wedding blue, it seems to be over. Every block of San Francisco has been dually checked for more bombs, every mech on the street disarmed and arrested. The X-men, tired and defeated, return home to Utopia.
Chapter Summary

Head table tempers flare.

Chapter Notes

Still along for the ride?

Head-table meeting is nothing short of a disaster. Storm and Xavier are on one end, the rest of us on the other, arguing over needs, wants, failed missions, missed opportunities, and everything else under the sun. Even the X-club is in on the action today, but a smug push of Storm's elegant finger, and Nemesis, Jeffries, Hank, and Rao go away.

It's Scott's appearance twenty minutes in – dressed in a hospital gown and various casts – that finally stops our squabbling. Popped stitches have marked the light blue fabric of his desperately short outfit with blood. He settles himself down in the first seat available – around the corner from the door. Breath heavy and frustrated, red lenses scan the table with nothing less than ridicule.

He holds his head in one hand, casted arm trying to stifle the leaking blood and pain of popped stitches over his chest. He licks at dry, chapped lips, and with a groan says, “Sit down.”

For long moments there is nothing but silence. Even Namor and all his arrogance refuses to speak as Scott gathers up his guts, will, and determination to continue. “Last night was a travesty,” he says, “and, I guarantee you, Osborne's not done.”

“Scott,” Storm eases through Scott's pained gasps, “I can handle this.”

A painful chuckle sends Scott's brows far down under red lenses. A few pained gasps later, “Yeah, I can see that.” A sharp inhale, and he moves a severely swollen knee into a more comfortable position. “You stay after,” he points to Storm. “We'll go over things.”

Emma starts handing out sheets of paper to the rest of us – assumptions of Osborne's movements, and simple explanations of his possible devious plans. “He's not done,” Scott warns us again through jilted breath. “Last night was a taste of what he's prepared for. It has to be verified, but I think –”

“Scott,” Xavier interrupts, his voice as easy as a breeze, “you need rest.”

The eerie smile that spreads across Scott's face is nothing less than unsettling. A deep throated half-chuckle stunted by pain and still damaged lung, he points crooked fingers at his one-time mentor. “I asked you,” he begins, his voice raw and half-whispered. “I asked for your help. What did you say?”

Xavier blinks blue eyes. “I said no,” he answers with all the innocence in the world. “I thought you could handle—”

“You said no,” Scott sneers with a vicious grin that shows teeth and ire. “And now?”
“I think you need help,” he answers, his tone soft logic and wounded care.

Pain gets the better of Slim for a moment. Head crashes back, hands tense up into jagged claws. His breath comes with vocalized grunts and swallows. A half-sob without tears and sadness. “So, you dismantle patrols and recon, and here we are.”

Xavier blinks again, a foreboding calmness. “And, here we are.” Xavier’s stare darts to Emma, but her face shows nothing but disgust. “Scott, even I could not have foretold -”

“You’re not welcome in this room!!!!!” he yells, jamming himself forward so fast and hard that stitches pop for the movement. He hits the floor on his knees, clawed hand grasping forward. Spite and anger wrench across his face. He pulls back mere moments, grabbing the jangled pain of broken ribs and reopened wounds before pushing his anger out again. “I asked, you said no.” His rage forced through flared nostrils. “And the moment you get in here, you try to destroy it all.”

“Scott -”

Miraculously climbing to his feet, his anger palpable enough to even force Namor back against the wall, Scott jabs forward once again, his finger pointed directly at his mentor. “I’m not failing this time!”

“Scott -”

“You knew!!!!!!!” Scott rages at the top of his lungs, good arm bent down flexing the scarred muscles of his biceps. More stitches pop, blood flows like rain down gown, arm, and leg. “You knew!” Scott heaps over against the cleared out table, out of breath and in pain.

Xavier glances around the room, his calm, blue eyes making sure to meet each and every one of us, before speaking again. “What did I know, Scott?”

A pained whimper as Scott grabs at dark hair. “You knew about Jean! You knew what she did!”

No retort follows because in that moment he begins to growl and scream. A desperate, half-crazed yell of voice and syllables, the denied temptation of force beams. Not even the fish-king dares snip a smile of amusement as Scott's vocal rush of torment sounds into the air. Adrenaline drives his steps down the side of the table, each one bringing him closer to Xavier. But pain is too quick to grab hold as more stitches come undone. He stumbles, caught by Warren. Blue arms reach up under his, pull him back to standing. “Not this room,” Scott grunts his anguish over Warren's shoulder, “Not here! You will not do this again!”

Warren continues to hold him upright as Xavier - his blue eyes showing signs of defeat - wheels himself out of the room. Warren sits Scott back into the head chair. Glasses of water, coffee are passed up to the front. Cyke ignores them all as he takes the next the few minutes to work through the heap o’ pain he's in.

He forces himself to tolerate the anguish of busted up body, and starts speaking. “Patrols revert to my schedule starting now,” he breathes. “Rogue and Bobby, I want rebuild teams on the ground. Take the kids, help with anything the civilians need – water will be essential. Warren, take three teams, work with SFPD, keep people from rioting. Do whatever they say. Logan, I want commed trackers on the street from now until I say so. Single units, play pretend. Mix with crowds, get me info.”

The meeting lasts another hour before Scott dismisses us. A telepathic blast refers the island to previous schedules. Groans and rebuffs are heard, but silenced by those of us who know better.
XX

Chapter Summary

Wants and needs.

Chapter Notes

Hopefully, this is a tad soul-satisfying in this ongoing adventure.

I sign out of patrol to Scott's malady-laden voice, and give quick instructions to the next group of trackers coming on. A moment of peace and silence as I board the boat back to the island with Hep, Laura, and Monet. We don't speak, we don't laugh, we don't even dare to whine. The X-Men screwed up, and now we gotta fix it.

In the War Room, Scott's still walking Storm through the piles of paperwork while listening to coms. He answers a call, directs Storm to mark a map on the wall with yellow marker, and returns to the stacks. Storm notices me in the hallway, but quickly averts her focus back to Scott.

Two beers, a helpin' of rice and beans, and I'm off to bed without much of a word to anyone. It's frustrating, you know, to watch the one person who keeps your world afloat drown like that. And, here I am, sittin' on the shore not knowin' how to swim. I consider talking to Chuck, but I don't.

Chuck's never been one to seek out the threats before they happen, just takin' the hits as they come. He raised Scott to take his place, and now that Xavier's seein' what he thinks are mistakes, and he wants to remedy it.

Scott on the other hand is tired of us dyin'. He wants to stop the shit before it happens, and feels that Xavier's methods aren't the solution that we need. Failure, right now, means the end of the mutant race.

And, then there's Jean... If Chuck knew, had any inclination of what she put him through...

Piotr stands outside his door, his nascent optimism crushed. Forehead up against the door frame, he doesn't notice me until I speak. “Petey?”

His eyes brighten immediately – both a truth and a falsehood. Pete's the type happy to see anyone he calls tovarisch, but that don't mean the sadness in his heart is okay. “Logan!” A brief pause. “Perhaps a beer?”

“I got whiskey.”

“Better than beer.” A smile quickly delights his face.

The conversation starts out slow – painting and books, poetry and words – then moves onto deeper things. Mariko, Kitty. He's half drunk by the time he mentions the meeting today, the thing that's really on his mind. “What did Xavier know?”
My tongue ain't nearly as loosened as his. I shrug, look him in the eye. “No idea.”

“Jean was a good person,” he slurs, taking a final gulp of liquor. I nod. “I don't understand what Scott meant. I don't understand.”

“Petey, sometimes things –”

“So, you do know,” he surmises, leaning his head back and looking down at me. I just got played. Kid's good, I'll give him that.

I loose a chuckle, hopin' to settle down his Sherlock moment. “Relationship wasn't as fairy tale as we thought it was.”

“Ah,” he voices with a nod. “Emma. I know.”

I shake a finger in the air, hoping to avoid putting Emma back on trial. Seems to me she's goin' through enough. “Phoenix,” I say. “Not Emma, Phoenix.”

Somehow, his whiskey induced brain makes sense of it. “Ah, Phoenix. I understand.” I have no clue what he's come up with. Lucky for me, he tells me. “Scott likes control. Phoenix was not controllable. Yes, much sense.”

I let him run with it if it gets him out my door so I can get some sleep. He forgets about Xavier, about Emma, about the meeting and everything else, and stumbles to his room. I make sure he gets inside before I lock my door behind me.

A couple hours later, I hear a knock, and I swear if it's Petey come back for more Watson and Friday, I'm going to shove a claw up his shiny, metal nose. “Yeah, yeah, give me a minute!” I yell. I grab a pair of undies off the floor, tug my legs inside, and stomp across my closet-sized room ready to choke someone. Key the lock, wrench open the door...

Fuck me.

Scott Summers.

He doesn't say a word. He doesn't have to. Five seconds later, he's inside and the door's locked.

Still dressed in his hospital gown, I can see the trickles of blood down arm and leg from busted up stitches. He's nervous, tired, uncomfortable. Red lenses focus on the floor, at his bare feet. He waits in silence. He wants and doesn't want to be here.

Silently, and to his shame, I walk him to my twin size bed. “You're bleeding.” I don't expect a reply and I don't get one. A gentle hand on his shoulder gets him to sit. I enter the bathroom, grab a fresh washcloth and my first-aid kit. He doesn't want to be stitched up. A mild struggle ensues – he's too fucking tired to fight and I have to go easy so I don't make things worse – but I get him laying down on the bed. He hears the pop, pop of the kit and is ready to go at it again, but lucky me, less than four hours rest and a broken body means he's easy to subdue. “You need stitched up again.”

Of course, the stubborn ass tries going at it one more time when I go for his gown, and of course, the stubborn ass loses because he's been a stubborn ass for days and won't get help when he needs it. His good arm stuffed underneath him, my knees stopping the rest of him from squirming around, I rip off the hospital gown to reveal Scott Summers in all his naked glory. Oh boy. Yeah. Shit. Fuck. Damn.

Legs for miles, perfect body, well, well endowed...
Shame turns his head to the side and his face a red deeper than his glasses. Awe and lust do the same to mine.

My first thought is running my tongue over what's left of his chest, down the six pack of his abdomen, and then lollipoppin' his more than gracious manhood. My second thought is stripping myself clean, flipping him over, and making him groan and moan until he can't remember what the word 'insecurity' means. But, then I look closer – the creases of his brow, the pinched tight lips and clenched jaw, the constant stream of gulps and swallows. I recall myself, my purpose right now, and shake away everything else.

I tender rough fingers over the gashes on his chest, the slice in his thigh up towards his hip, and then finally, the surgical wounds around his ribs. “Popped more'n half your stitches, Cyke,” I say sympathetically. “It's either me or Rao. Your choice.”


I pour copious amounts of alcohol – not the whiskey – onto the wash cloth and as delicately as I can with these hands of mine, I begin to clean the wounds. It's not the sting of anesthetic that bothers him. No, it's me; the fact that he came here, to me, to this room; that he wants to deny it, but he wants to be here. It's his shame, his guilt, his constant string of perceived failures that only he blames himself for. His one good hand slowly works its way into his hair and over his face to hide his thoughts from me. I can smell the faintest whiff of salt tears, but he recovers himself quickly, putting his good hand on the bed beside him and letting me fix him up.

The stitches go less easily. Small jolts through his body as I push the needle through already sore, reddened skin. Time passes, but eventually, I get him all sewn up again. I pop the lid to the med kit closed. “Good night, Cyke,” I whisper, placing a gentle kiss to his forehead.

His movement is fast and unpredicted. His good arm wraps around the back of my neck and pulls me into the bed beside him. Pulls at me until my shoulder collapses underneath me and my chest and head awkwardly hit the pillow. Med kit tumbles off the bed, and as he continues to pull, I climb inside the space he's created for me. A distance – twisted up blankets and fear of his wounds. His good hand continues to beg me closer, and slowly, drawn in by the heat between us, I obey. Lifting up slightly, to his silent protest, I wrangle the blanket free of legs and knees, and pull it over our shoulders. Breathless, he pushes his naked body against mine, pushes so hard that I can feel his heartbeat against my skin, the cross-hatch of his stitches, the leaf-like tremble of arms and legs and jaw. The edge of glasses dig up under my chin as his head buries itself against my neck. It's a silent, sad recognition of what he wants. Wary of his ribs, I oblige, and wrap my arms around him, gently, carefully, hoping that he can feel my strength, that he'll take it, absorb it, use it to keep himself from breaking. He heaves a deep sigh of relief.

I gently scratch my hands across his scalp, dragging fingers through his hair and back. Calm, smooth circles over his spine. His quiet breath pillows out across my shoulder.

And this, I realize, sometime after his body settles into sleep – this strange, ethereal moment, mixed with all the others, good and bad – this is what I want. This moment, just us, him and me, quiet, still, calm. This is what I want to keep steady and safe. This is what I want to protect.
Chapter Summary

Bad patients don't get well.

Chapter Notes

If you can't tell, I miss Scott and Logan. X-Men comics haven't been the same without them...

***Virkon is a medical grade disinfectant.

Hours later, a blaring sense of danger riles me from sleep, a sense so strong that I shoot up straight in the bed and look around the room for someone hiding in the shadows. Taking in my unhaunted surroundings, I wonder if I'd had a nightmare. But, then I hear the strained shallow breaths and a choked, ragged cough beside me, and look down at a sweat soaked Scott Summers.


Not botherin' with lights, locks, or anything else, I scoop Scotty up in my arms and head for the door. Movie people make this people-carryin' shit look easy, but it ain't, 'specially when the person you're trying to carry is a foot taller than you. It's clumsy, awkward, and considerin' the pack o' broken ribs Slim's sportin' these days, dangerous. Still, I go for it, trudgin' down the hall as fast I can hoping that I don't drop him.

It isn't until I run into Proudstar one hallway down that I realize Summers is naked and I'm in my underwear. Yeah, this is gonna go over real well. “Med Bay!” I yell – hopin' One-eye will forgive me – and push Scott off into Proudstar's much taller, much broader arms.

Bottom of the stairs, Rao is less than pleased to see her favorite patient back again. James unloads him carefully on a bed, and starts mulling over whether he wants to ask about health or fitness first. Thick finger points at me, a suspicious question on his lips.

Thank beer for Rao and her stern look that brings a seriousness to it all. Quick commands follow. She points at James. “Ice. Lots of it.” To me, she points at an old metal tub against the wall. “Soap, water, sanitized. Use the Virkon.” She runs tape under red lenses to hold Scott's eyes shut.

James returns with an armful of ice packs. “Enough to fill that tub. Wake Drake.” Rao places the packs under Slim's arms, on his forehead, and across his body. She keeps a careful eye on his temperature and breathing, checks his vitals and readies several IV drips in the process. Minutes tick, her anxiety grows. She keeps glancing towards the stairs, then back down to the thermometer.

Tub cleaned and sanitize, I drag it over to the bed. Rao's impatience with Proudstar wanes further.
“Help me,” she says, and pushes her arms underneath Scott's chest. Together we lift him down into the tub and place the few ice packs over top. She checks his temp again. He wheezes, dragging harsh breaths into his chest. “Damn it,” she curses under her breath. “107. I need Drake now!”

Up the stairs I go, hatin' myself for not dragging the goat back down to Med Bay earlier. Anyone else, and I would've; their pride, my groin, be damned. But, when it comes to Summers right now, logic just ain't applicable. Push and pull, near and far, I can't seem to get it right.

A hallway down, I see Drake and Proudstar, neither grasping the true gravity of the situation. “Faster, assholes! Now!” I yell. Before either one can pony up a lick of sarcasm, I pop my claws. “I said now!” Yep, they start runnin'.

Scott's body tremors with the heat of fever. Rao keeps his head from banging on the back of the tub. “Ice!” her voice urgent. Bobby slides to ground right beside the tub, and starts making cubes of ice. “Hold his head,” she directs me. “Tell me when his temp hits 99,” she tells James and returns to preparing her machines.

At 99, we pull Scott from the ice and back to the bed, his body shivering from the cold. “Hold his legs, shoulders, and head.” With practiced care she pierces veins with IV’s and starts hooking him up to the various machines. After he's covered with blankets, she pushes a tube down his throat, pulls the oxygen mask back over his face. Her stern dark eyes tell us that we're not out of the woods yet.

Sometime later, in the constant, steady beeps of machines, Rao pulls a chair to the opposite side of Scott's bed. I guess 'cause I'm in my underwear, and that I'm the one that stayed she figures it out. “You did a good job with the stitches,” she remarks, a touch of warmth to her otherwise calm tone. She checks temp and stitches, and hands me a cloth and a bottle of sanitizer to keep me busy. I clean wounds as she checks machines.

“It's not your fault,” she speak softly. “I'm fairly certain he was sick this morning.”

“Then why'd you let him leave?” I regret the question and my tone, but Kavita Rao's too smart to take offense.

A professional smile, honed through years of bed-side talks. “For the same reason you didn't bring him back tonight. His stubbornness.” Not quite satisfied with the readouts she's getting, she ups the dial on the antibiotics. “If he makes it through the night without another fever spike, he should be able to recover. He will need scans in the morning, and an incredible amount of rest.”

An anxious silence falls between us as Scott's temperature beeps up one notch. I rub my eyes. “At least he'll get some sleep.”

“I've never met a man so determined, which I suppose is a blessing considering the circumstances. Anything less and I venture mutants would be extinct right now.” Dark eyes search my face for hints and clues. Pretty sure she sees 'em, those little bits of I-care-way-too-damned-much and if-something-happens-to-him-someone-better-strap-me-down-'cause-I'll-kill-'em-all. “Was he always like this?”

“Pretty much. Since I've known him anyway.” An exasperated laugh, an amused smile, I scratch my head in remembrance. “First time I met him... I hated him. Oh, I hated him. Here was this bossy ass prick with his big boy pants pulled plumb up to his ears, no more'n eighteen. Kept tellin' me what to do, how to do it, when to do it, and who to do it to. I wanted to gut him, tear him to pieces and dump his pretty parts in a volcano. That's how bad that boy got under my skin. Do this, don't do that, save this person, beat that robot, sheathe those claws... Nonstop fucking nonsense for years.”

Rao smiles warmly, dark red mouth starting to show signs of exhaustion. “But you listened.”
I nod with a smile. “Yeah, I listened. Couldn't avoid it, he lectured so damn much.” A long pause and half-exhausted chuckle. “He'll fight for ya. Tooth and nail, against everything and anyone. He ain't bulletproof, ain't got no heals, super strength, or unbreakable bones, but he'll act like it if it means gettin' everyone out of a scrap alive. And he knows you; knows what you can do; knows how to push you. And then he'll just keep pushin' and pushin', until you wake up some years down the road a completely different man than what you started from. So, yeah, I listened. We all did, and we're all better people for it.” Another pause, a flash of wit and teeth. “Except maybe Drake. Boy's still got a hundred years 'fore he figures it out.”

Temp beeps down one degree, and my weary bones sigh relief. “Get some rest,” Rao issues in the silence. “I'm sure he wants you at the meeting tomorrow.”
“I am not here to listen to some Wakandan queen,” Namor sneers during Storm's list of issuances for the day. “Where is the boy king?”

An uneasy silence settles across the table. Many eyes flick up to meet hers, wanting an answer to the same question. Storm had hoped to keep Scott's flagging condition under wraps for a day or two, at least until things were more manageable, but Namor's big mouth has stalled her plans. “He's resting,” she says quietly, with just enough bite to counter further comments.

However, Namor's not swayed. “He rests on the eve of war?” he scoffs. “After his tirade yesterday about the dangers we face, he decides to rest?!” Sharply angled brows mold into fury and spite. “I have little use for a man such as that. Tell me when a real leader rises amongst you.” His arm swipes across the table, knocking over mugs of coffee and water. In a matter of seconds, he's on his feet and heading for the door.

Snkt. Amused at the sound of adamantium popping through skin and muscle, a delighted snarl curls the side of his face. Over his shoulder, his dark eyes settle upon me. “You think to fight me, little man?” He turns slowly, chest puffed out, face all twisted up with boiling rage. I meet his rage with a volcano of my own. Breath heavy through flared nostrils, I take my own step forward, popping the rest of my claws. “You have guts, beast,” Namor seethes. “I should like to see them for myself.”

Three steps between us, we each take one when a spray of ice suddenly builds a wall between us, temporarily cooling the building rage as we turn to look at Bobby Drake. Hands iced up and serious as heck, Bobby's cheerful features are nothing less than the threat of six-feet-under. Even Warren – who's known Bobby since they were kids – is surprised.

Bobby takes a quick glance at 'Ro and shakes his head. His blue eyes focus on the fish king, the darkness in his eyes softening. “Cyclops isn't here because he can't be.” The confession perks Namor's interest, but not yet enough to dull the rage. Bobby continues, hoping to calm the Atlantean asshole further. “He nearly died last night, and if he doesn't rest-.”

Namor pushes his lips into a smug pinch. “You protect him for his weaknesses, yet again. Is that all you are? Weakness and excuses? Is that what's to become of this Utopian kingdom? Atlanteans are warriors, and you are anything but.”

“Least he's not the one that --” At Rogue's urging, Bobby's mouth clamps shut before insults makes things worse. Namor smiles in victory.
But, the victory is temporary. A deep breath and the rise of ice-cooled wind, Storm twirls long, elegant fingers in the air. White hair billows out above shoulders. The dangerous scent of ozone and the beginning buzz of static etches across the room. “Enough,” she warns us. “Cyclops laid out his plans for the next week. We will continue to patrol, rebuild, and gather information per his orders. If you wish to argue the matter further, then take it up with me after the meeting, Your Highness.”


The Atlantean king's muscled chest erupts in serpentine laughter. Raptured hilarity burns his face red and doubles him over to balance on the table. He holds his stomach at the Wakandan queen's admittance to subordination. Static pops electric sparks across the room as Ro's indignation smolders. Black eyes- undeterred by her threatened outburst - glitter with immense gratification, while blue eyes grow darker and darker. Thankfully, Storm keeps herself together and waits out the torment. Laughter subsides slowly, and Namor takes his seat. “Very well, then, Your Majesty. Continue.”

Meeting goes smooth after that. Patrols, recons, security measures, rebuilds, supplies. Not much arguin', definitely no whinin' or cryin'. Storm reminds Rogue to hang the signs for karaoke night, which seems out of place midst the havoc of the last few days. “Cylops insisted,” Storm explains. “However, we'll have to find an alternative to your proposed food and beverage table. The snacks that he had saved for the event disappeared in our day of extra rations, and due to the damage on the mainland, food donations have slowed to a halt.”

I'm not sure if I'm the only one who sees it – the glaring admission behind her words. And, I wish she'd just say it, like Cyke would, but she doesn't. One day of extra rations did us a whole lotta bad. Scotty's been bringing in donations to supplement food shipments since we got here, and with our food shipment near two weeks away, we're gonna be scroungin' dumpsters to get fed.

Emma's been real quiet since the riots, tryin' to lay low and keep outta trouble, but not today. Her face flushes red with an I-told-you-so glare before thinkin' better of another argument. She stretches long arms behind her head and leans back into her seat. “Don't worry about it,” she says proudly. “I'll cover the food and beverages. Consider it an apology for... certain behaviors.”

Having seen the financial accounts, Storm is reluctant to accept. Emma's still rich, but Utopia has a long way to go until it becomes self-sufficient. Her much appreciated charity is better spent on things other than a night of drunken crooning and love songs. “Cyclops' orders,” the White Queen shrugs with a wink and a smile.

“Very well,” Storm agrees.

By evening, karaoke signs are hung, a small stage is set up in the cafeteria, and even though we're still in the midst of riot clean-up, city clean-up, and bein' thrown off the cliff of extinction, people are actually looking forward to tomorrow night's little party.

Down in Med Bay, Rao beckons me over with a downward wave of her hand. She hands me the cloth and antiseptic, and moves about her other duties. “Careful of the new tubes,” she quiets and directs my attention to the tubes inserted near Cyke's ribs and lungs to help drain the infection. “They need to be thoroughly cleaned, but try not to jostle them about.”

Completely under, Scott's chest rises and falls with the sound of the oxygen machine. His face is pale, lips chapped, eyes taped shut. A steady beep marks his temperature at 101- much lower than the night before - and another keeps tabs on his slowed, even pulse. I brush the cloth against
reddened skin and criss-crossed stitches, taking note of the other scars that they mire. Slivers and crescents, circles and crosses, white and pink and calloused red. Too many scars. I'd look the same if I didn't have my healing factor.

I try to think back on our years of fightin', to match which wound to which villain, but other than the ones I caused when we got the bomb out of his stomach, I can't place 'em. The man just never complained enough for me to notice. I think that's why the rest of us didn't complain either. Didn't matter who impaled him with what, who shot him up with lasers or bullets, who knocked him silly, he got right back up on his feet without one damn complaint. The rest of us followed his lead without question or reservation.

I wonder which of these Jean carved into him during her madness.

Jean Grey. Red. Jeannie. Her clone, herself, her Phoenix. Every tear I've ever seen Scotty shed revolved around her. Hell, for years, the only time he ever smiled was around her. Those moments when she was the red-haired sweet and sass that everyone fell in love with, when her eyes were soft and full of love, when she was herself. Her actual real self. Those moments, that's when he'd smile.

I can't imagine havin' to push back all the shit rollin' around his head from lost memories in order to look at her like that. To swallow down all that fear and doubt, pain and insecurity in order to meet her eyes and smile. It was somethin' I never did. If I was angry, I showed it, whether I knew the reason or not. Pop a claw in rage, cry myself to sleep, drink myself into a ten minute coma... Didn't matter if I knew why I felt the way I did, I'd just roll with it, let it happen. And if someone was standin' next to me when I felt the blood in my eyes, well, then that was their problem, not mine.

“Wolverine.” Cyclops warned in his practiced, professional, I'm-the-leader voice, lifted his visor, and blasted me to the ground. “Get it under control.”

“They got Jeannie!” I roared in rage, and he shot me back down again.

“Yes, I know,” he iterated, face calm and controlled, hand readied on his visor, “and you going in there half-cocked isn't going to help. We take a breath, regroup, make a plan.”

“Fuck you, Summers,” I growled, hit by another eye beam.

“Cyclops. We're on mission. Now, calm it down before you kill any chance of us getting her back.”

I shook my head. “You're one cold bastard. Can't believe she puts up with you,” I sneered. “That's your fucking girlfriend down there and you're treatin' this like --”

Two fists, balled up into my collar, he jolted me from the ground. Face so red and close I could smell Jeannie's lingering perfume mixed in with his aftershave. Like a fucking hammer to my head, I could feel the slow heat build beneath my stomach – not anger, not rage, but the idea that I was this close to the asshole's face and all I wanted to do was reach out, get him on the ground and fuck him senseless.

He swallowed and stared. Just held me there, swallowed again, and like he'd suddenly grabbed a snake by the tail, he dropped me me back down with a push. “We regroup and make a plan.” He didn't look at me the rest of the mission.

It was evening before the plan solidified. A couple of recon missions courtesy of Sprite, and a quick check of the area via Nightcrawler's ports, and we departed. Fought our way through some militarized mayhem, destroyed an evil science lab, and rescued Jeannie all to boot. Cyke sat by her unconscious form all the way home, strokin' red hair back from her face, watchin' her for any sign of
Summers was still sittin' in the infirmary the next morning when 'Ro finally convinced him to come eat breakfast with the rest of us. Kurt and Piotr tried to lift his mood, Storm and Kitty kept him busy. But, he crawled back down there every chance he got to watch over her.

Later that evening, I watched all secret from the doorway while Scott talked to her about the morning's Danger Room session, Kitty's homework, and the possibility of a new mutant sighting. On he went, all business, all the things she'd a known about if she'd been awake. Then, he fell to silence, and he watched. When she finally woke an hour later, the boy breathed for the first time since her capture. A soft smile of relief. “Welcome back. I missed you,” he said placing a soft kiss against her forehead and folding her hand in his. I wasn't sure who I was more jealous of, him or her, but it didn't matter. They belonged to each other.

If it weren't for my heightened senses, I wouldn't have heard Proudstar on the stairs behind me. Quiet as a leaf falling from the tree, still groggy from sleep, he stands at the foot of Scott's bed and scratches his ear. I know what he'll eventually squirm around to, but right now he'll play it cool. “He gonna make it?”

“He'll make it.”

James shakes his head, still squirmin'. “Recon still the same?”

“Yeah. Make sure Hep keeps dirty talk to a minimum. Piotr's on com duty, so keep his innocence intact.”

“No telepath tonight?”

“Frost might check in with you, but she's got her own shit to deal with. So, stick to coms. Scott doesn't want us wearin' out our psychics when we got tech that does just as well.”

James wriggles a little more, a worm on the end of a hook. Finally, he sucks it up with a big breath and points at Scott. “Where was he?” I feign ignorance. “Last night.” Wriggle, wriggle, squirm, squirm. “In the hall.” Scratch the ear, look at the ceiling. “He was na... You had und... Scott and Emma...” There is no out to this. He's lookin' for one, but he can't find it. Two palms in the air, he wants an answer to a question he can't formulate.

I stare up at him, rubbing my chin, tryin' to think of what to say before the kid's questions start a round of rumors that'll only add to the drama surrounding everything right now. And, once again, good ol' Kavita Rao comes to the rescue. “Ah, I wondered why his stitches were good as new when you brought him in. Thank you, Logan. Cyclops' stubbornness is a thorn in my side.”

James knows it's part lie, but in that part lie is the truth, and now that he has it, he's ready to go on scout duty. He considers sarcasm to get himself out of here, but he's even less inclined to humor than One-eye. Instead, he shrugs his hulking shoulders. “Well, whatever.”

“Jimmy-” I start before he can escape up the stairs. James turns to look, a slight nod of annoyance and a gesture of irritated understanding.

Yeah, this is going to go over real well.
The cold touch of diamond hits my shoulder, and I look up from my Med Bay nap to see Emma Frost standing over top of me. She glances quickly at still sleeping Scott before speaking. “War Room, now.”

Petey, Betsy, and 'Ro discuss a city map dotted up with yellow circles, blue squares, green diamonds, and black triangles. “Monet went missing fifteen minutes ago,” Storm explains, pointing to a triangle in the northeast of the city. “Cannonball reported a mech sighting, and Monet disappeared during combat.”

Betsy adds, “I can't contact her telepathically, so she's either unconscious or...”

Emma interrupts before Pyslocke's thoughts get further. “Where is Gambit's patrol?” Storm points to an empty space on the south part of the map. “Warpath and Hepzibah?” Storm points to places to the north and west.

“Sam report air traffic or were the mechs on foot?” I ask.

Emma sheds her diamond form and holds her hand in the air for patience. “On foot.”

“So, they can't have gotten far.” On the computer, Betsy zooms into the city map, getting close enough to look at buildings. “They put me in a storage unit,” she explains, “So, if we're lucky, they're trying to pull the same trick with Monet.”

“There,” Ororo points at a shopping plaza snuggled between two high rise apartment buildings. “Most of those shops look to be abandoned. I'll tell Cannonball. Keeping looking for other spots.”

Emma stays behind, keeping patrols, scouts, and back-up in telepathic contact. The mental silence is fully controlled as we search for Monet. I join up with Sam's team, and head out for the shopping plaza.

Just as Storm figured, half the shops are abandoned. Cannonball cools his fire about twenty yards away and starts watchin' the place, giving time for me, Dazzler, Boom Boom, and Dust to catch up. Dust does the initial scout around the buildings, spreading herself thin across the place before returning with an unsure shrug. “There's a locked door and some broken windows, but if they're here...”

“They're here,” I tell her. The group looks at me. ‘Gut feelin’.”
“You said there were broken windows?” Cannonball asks. Dust nods. “Think you could just poke your head in, see inside? If we could narrow it down.”

Boom Boom grins. “I’ve got a better idea!”

We spread out around the plaza, each hidden from view in the shadows, watchin’, waitin’ for our moment. Double B runs up, sparks a few fire cracker bombs, then runs back into the shadows. Rinse, repeat, two more times before the stupid mech-heads finally start sneaking out the doors of an old hair salon. Smart idea – not only do we know where they're at, but we also know they're down deep.

A quick thought to Ems and she puts Storm, Psylocke, and Colossus on their way. I remind everyone of the mechs’ hotspots – knees, back right shoulder, left neck. Take ‘em down fast, hard, and get Monet out of there.

I make the first strike, jumpin’ down from the plaza roof to hit the back right shoulder and then left neck of a mech. Six mechs come at me while I start angling for knees. Sam's right on the outside, plugging away at another two. Boom Boom lights one up with a 1,2,3, and pieces o’ metal sing through the air. Dazzler blinds three o’ the ones on my back, and starts pounding away on another.

Storm arrives before the others, bringing her own magical brand of sizzle to the party. She don't aim for hot spots, though. No, she aims for the complete electro-fry. Lightning strikes down and I feel the singe of my sideburns. “Careful, babe,” I think at her through Emma's mind, “Like to leave here with a full head o' waffles 'stead of just the syrup.” Emma giggles in my thoughts.

Gas guns come out shortly after. Dust goes after the first, sawin' away at straps and binds like a diamond-toothed saw. Guy ain’t even sure what’s hittin' him yet, just knows he’s getting cut up by somethin’ he can’t see. Dazzler hits the second with a flash o’ light and plasma burst. “Stay on mechs, Boom Boom,” Storm warns Tabitha, as Tabitha could knock us all out if she bursts a chamber.

More mechs, and finally Petey. A bull in a china shop, kid roars across the parking lot. Two mechs skid across concrete until getting smashed against a lamp post. Bungled up and dizzy, the jackasses swagger their punches as Colossus hits their hot spots. The mechs go down.

By the time Psylocke arrives, the outside battle is almost done. She stabs one with her neural blade, but the feedback from some sort of psi-shield knocks her to oblivion. She screams when she goes down, her face lit with psionic pain. A single mech escapes the doorway where Ali and Dust are still fighting and runs straight for Psylocke. Lucky for Bets, I saw him. Three minutes, eighteen seconds and that mech’s not moving.

“Inside,” Storm directs when most of the two dozen mechs have been taken out. She, in all her majestic glory, stands guard over Psylocke, the door, and the parking lot in case someone tries to escape. Even as we enter the doorway to get inside, I hear the snap, crackle, pop of lightning.

“Light ’em up, Dazzler,” Cannonball says as soon as we get inside. Ali responds with orbs of blue and white lights – the right mix of colors to pick up traces of blood, chemicals, and the whites o’ their eyes. Sam sends Boom Boom, Colossus, and Dazzler to search back rooms and closets, and taps me first down the stairs with him and Dust on my heels.

Dust's sand storm shifts light airy particles over our heads, just high enough so that we don't breathe her in, but low enough that she can swarm if we get ambushed. Sam stills his fire feet for a sneak attack.

At the bottom of the stairs, I point to the right – a strong scent of magnolia and cardamom, Monet's
favorite scents. A long dark hallway that runs under the plaza, straight out into the back parking lot. On her end, Em's lookin' at blueprints. This tunnel shouldn't exist.

A crash above us, but Sam keeps us goin' forward. Tunnel gets smaller as we go, barely enough for me to stretch my elbows. Cannonball's duckin' low, and Dust is a few feet behind us watching our backs in case we missed someone.

At the end of the tunnel is a small room 'bout as big as my bedroom back on the island. And ain't nothin' here except for Monet, gassed unconscious, bound and gagged to a chair. No guards, no weapons, no machines. No freakin' clue as to what's goin' on. “We're gettin' set up somehow,” I growl, lettin' Emma look through my eyes at the room and the tunnel behind us.

Ali, Petey, and Tabitha come to the same conclusion. Nothin' but a bunch of moldy old hair stuff, upstairs gave no more hints than downstairs. Storm and Cannonball get Psylocke and Monet home, leavin' the rest of us to deal with a couple o' hours of police statements.
Still fevered and plugged into Rao's good-stuff drips, Scott nods and grunts as Emma and Storm explain the previous night's patrol. Whether he's takin' it in or not, we can't tell. Guy's a space cadet, but, as Emma explained earlier, he deserves to know what's happening. Not sure I agree, but what can I do?

Storm and Emma leave, and Cecilia Reyes makes herself scarce as I pull a chair to his bedside.

Eyes still taped, he can't see me, but a flick of brow acknowledges the chair. He waits patiently to hear his visitor speak. I let my silence float between us, taking a few well-deserved moments to just study him, the tarnished beauty still prevalent under cuts and bruises, masks and tubes. A fragile, dazed smile pushes up against cheeks and drug-dazed eyelids. “Logan,” he wheezes. He attempts lifting his fingers towards mine, but can't quite make it. He tries again, and I meet him half-way. His cold hand tries to gain grip on mine, tries to thread fingers and keep pressure, but once again, he can't quite make it. “Sorry,” he breathes into the sound of injected air.

I squeeze his hand tightly, folding his fingers between my palms in a warming rub. “Ain't got nothin' to be sorry for, Slim.” He's gone to the world not thirty seconds later.

As I get up to leave, Reyes pokes her head around the corner. “He asks for you sometimes,” she says. Then with a smile – more open, friendlier than Rao's – she adds, “Must be the drugs.”

I smile, lift my brows out of admiration for the well-timed burn. “Yeah. Must be.”

She's still laughing as I make my way up the stairs.

A few hours sleep, hot dog and instant mashed potatoes, I make my way back to the War Room to get an update on the situation. Bobby mans the coms. “Aunti Em got us a whole salsa bar for tonight,” he chortles upon my entrance. “No beer though. She doesn't want the whole place hung over if something happens.”

I nod, not nearly as excited as he is. “Any updates on Monet, coms?”

“Rebuild teams are comin' back early. Clean-up's done. Waiting on inspectors to start construction. But, that's about it.”

“Nothin' from patrols or Nemesis?”
Bobby shakes his head. “Coms have been silent. Monet's awake. She came by about an hour ago.” I nod. “Nemesis said they shifted the formula for the gas. Still easy to neutralize, though.”

I keep Bobby company before his shift sign-off, and greet Betsy on her way inside. She's still got a raging headache from the psionic blow-out, but she insists that she can handle com duty tonight. “All I ask is for a heaping plate from the salsa bar.”

“There'll be burritos, too!” Bobby rubs his hands together in villainous greed.

Betsy rubs her slender stomach. “I'll take three. Chicken. Spicy. Lots of guac.”

The cafeteria's abuzz with gigglin' chatter and spontaneous cheers of mirth and elation. Emma directs the set up of the underwhelmingly-described salsa bar. This ain't just salsa and chips, it's a full on Mexican feast with enough food to feed us for the next two days. The whole place smells like onions, garlic, cumin, jalapenos, and mouthwatering deliciousness. Black tied waiters and waitresses place buffet-pans on two large tables angled towards the windows.

On the side of the room, Ali, Rogue, and Kurt set up the lyrics screen and sound system, test mics, and pump up spirits further with random calls to the crowd and enticing light shows. Pixie flutters nearby, a drift of magic dust in the air, ready for go-time. Kid's smilin' so bright right now, we might need SPF fifty before long.

People keep crowdin' in, taking seats at tables and on the floor in front of the stage. The lights finally dim to cheers and applause that takes a full three minutes to die down. “Alright y'all,” Rogue speaks into the mic. “Y'know how this works. Leavin' patrols get first dibs on dinner and song, then the rest o' y'all can file in. Have fun!”

A line starts for the buffet and Tabitha's the first one on stage.

“You're not staying are you?” Emma asks. I didn't even know she was there. She smiles out of concern. “I apologize for my behavior. It was deplorable.”

I shake my head. “I understood it.”

“Did you?”

“Well, maybe not the riot part. That was... that was somethin' else. Quire woulda fallen on his knees for that one.” She shares my teasing laughter. “You okay?”

“No,” she sighs, “but I will be. In time.”

“You're doin' good by him right now.”

She claps her hands for the end of Tabitha's song. Tabby hands the mic off to Paige who treats us to Dolly Parton's 'Jolene'. How fucking ironic.

“I'm only following his orders.” A deep, almost diamond sigh and flared nostrils. Blue eyes squint tight with thought. “I worked my way through the Hellfire Club from the lowest rung to the top. I've run a multi-million dollar business for over a decade. Headmaster of three different schools for our delectable little mutants. Yet this? There are days when so much is going on that I simply shut down.”

“I getcha. Believe me, I getcha.”

“It's worth it, though,” she says, with the first glint of hope in her voice I've heard in weeks. “If we
can survive, then it's all worth it.”

“Yeah. It's worth it.”

She pats me on the shoulder. “Should I save a plate or two?”

I smile and squeeze her shoulder back. “Yeah. That'd be good o' you.”

The party continues with a mis-timed hip-hop attempt by Rockslide and Anole. Laughter fills the empty space at my side as Emma returns to keeping the lines around the buffet organized and under control. She shifts in and out of diamond form, a constant flicker of prism and flesh. Controlled and calm, then glistening with tears. Nah, she definitely ain't Jeannie.

“Scott, please,” Jean begged. Moonlight filtered down through red hair like ice on flame. Her green eyes stared up into red lenses, hand caressing soft circles over his chest. Slowly they tendered their way down to still ripped up stomach, drawing lines over the surgical incisions. “This is what we wanted, remember?”

From a nearby tree, I watched as Scott gently pulled her hand away from the still tender flesh. For the longest time, he didn't say a word, didn't move. Staring straight ahead, red lenses focused on the shift of moonlit grass, he took a deep breath. “It's not the right time.”

Green eyes flared frustration for a moment, flicked upwards towards my tree. She knew I was there. She didn't care. “There will never be a right time, Scott,” she whispered, keeping her eyes focused on me. “But, if we don't do this now, we may never get another chance.”

“Don't do this,” I thought to her, purposefully projecting my thoughts. Loss and fear, lust and want, pretty sure my words gave away more than I intended. A brief moment of anger hinged at her lips, but she doused it quickly.

“I have no choice,” she thought back, her thoughts lapping across my head like warm silk and swaying hammocks.

Cooper had picked up Xavier some days ago. Mansion was a wreck, team was all split up. Everything and everyone was fallin’ apart, yet here Jean was tryin' to convince Scott to run off to Alaska. “He needs time to recover,” her thoughts continued. “Besides, Storm can handle it.”

“I'm sure she can, but-” I pushed back before she dumped a load o' thoughts into the back of my brain. She needed him. She needed him more than she needed the dream, the school, the team. She needed him whole and alive because without him, she was gonna lose herself to the firebird again. A slight hint of wildfire to reinforce the urgency of her actions, the dark nightmare of destroying a solar system, the pain and echoes of those who had died when she lost herself. “Enough, Red. I get it,” I relented. Just as an animal threatened to destroy my self, the Phoenix threatened to destroy hers. “Just take care of him like he does you.”

Whether she sensed my heart-deep sorrow over losing him or not, I couldn't tell. She shut the mind link down and continued with her pleas. By mornin’, they were makin’ plans to go to Alaska, start a family, and leave the X-men behind. While she twirled around the mansion, humming to herself as she packed her things, Scott sat in silence in Xavier's office.

He'd started a family once some years ago with Maddie. Lost it all not long after. Failed her, failed his son, and nearly got the world destroyed in the process when Jean's evil clone went bat-shit crazy and tried to burn it all to the ground.

“You're leavin',” I spoke into the silence. He nodded, red lenses focused on piles of paperwork.
“Sure that's what you want?”

Head lifted, a slight downward twitch at the edge of his lips. Words stuttered and stopped, a slight shake of head. Ruby quartz hedged back down to papers. “It's for the best,” he said evenly, a voice like smooth granite. I shrugged, turned to leave.

“Logan,” he sounded just before I hit the exit, a hitch to his voice, a soft crackle of something stuck in his throat. I turned to look at him, but any hint of what that hitch was disappeared as soon as I laid eyes on him. Face went blank, determination returned to bitter baritone. “It's for the best.”

The sounds of the party don't reach Med Bay. Down here it's all machines and the click of Rao's heels against the floor. Her dark eyes direct me to the laid out cloth and cleaner before she disappears somewhere in the depths. I start with the tubes and lines hookin' him up to the machines.

Under the amber lamplight of sleepy-time in Med Bay, Scott's busts and scrapes look somehow worse. Bruises shade into sickly green; reddened cuts streak his body like candle flames. Chest rises and falls with the click, air, click of the machine. Temp's 103, higher than this mornin', but the moist sheen along his hairline shows that he's still fightin' it.

I help the doc bathe him – a strictly professional cleanin' – shave the growing stubble on jaw and face, and change his gown. Drug oblivion keeps him asleep, which makes the whole damned process easier. It takes about an hour, but he looks a little more like himself – steel jawed and stoic. If he were wearin' his visor instead of a mask and tubes, I'd say he was good as rain. “He'll be fine,” Rao assures me. “Just give him time.”

Pleasant conversations that have nothing to do with mutants, extinction, or Cyclops. A few askances for help with sterilizin' and takin' stock of supplies. Rao keeps me busy for a couple o' hours - I s'pose so I don't dwell myself into my own type of oblivion - and then lets me return to the bedside to catch some zees before I have to trudge myself upstairs and face another day of fit hittin' the shan. Or, so I think. At least I get the shit storm part of that right.

There must be somethin' about three o'clock in the damn morning 'cause that's when Scott Summers bolts right up outta the bed, graspin' at tubes and wires and all else keepin' him locked down into place. In the seconds that it takes me to shake off the dust o’ dreams, he’s managed to rip the morphine drip from his vein and send the stand half way across the room. Monitors beep red crazy as he pulls himself free of electric pulses and IV’s, pulls the mask right off his damn face, pulls the tube from his throat, and about takes half the machines down with it.

Rao comes in at a rush, trippin' over the back of high heels, and we fight against Slim's fury of frantic flailing, tryin' our best to get him subdued without hurting him. We grab legs, then arms, then head, trying to push him back as breath wheezes in and out of still congested lungs. Hand claws at taped up eyes, pullin' a strip off before I can grab it. Teeth gnash down into my upper arm, causin' me to draw back, and he rips off the other piece. Knee flies up into my shoulder. Elbow kicks out and bashes Rao up under her chin. Stitches pop. Cast cracks as he beats his bad arm against my adamantium chest. Hectic hands finally find purchase in Rao's collar. He jerks her close, just inches away from his face. “War Room,” he forces with ragged breath and barely contained rage, “Or I open my eyes.”
Chapter Summary

Plots, plans, and preparations.

Chapter Notes

Believe it or not, I do have a life....

***calcite is a rock that picks up phosphorescence/ magnesium is a mineral needed for blood composition

Lotsa raised brows, gasps, and quiet murmurs as head table files into the War Room. Anxious eyes exchange worried, questioning glances. But, a call at this time o’ night can only mean one thing. The end of the world's on its way, and the X-men gotta save it.

Scott, bent over the table, suppresses flinches of pain as Rao and Reyes scurry to get him rebandaged and hooked up to antibiotics before the start of the meeting. Even more anxiety's raised when everyone realizes that this ain't a normal head-table meeting with just the moment-necessary advisors. This is the whole head table, including X-Club and night shift leads herded into the screen filled space. Chairs get taken first, the rest of us stand in the surround and listen to the sounds of ragged breath and held-back chokes of pain.

Namor watches, his features raised with both amusement and respect, as Scott breathes through the pain of another restitching. Half his gown dangling at his side, the scars of the last few days are now out in the open. Lots o' gawkin’, lots o’ cringin’, lots o’ wonderin' why the hell Slim's here in the shape he's in. Sam and Betsy look at me. I shrug. Fucking Proudstar. Just wait until I get my hands around that barrel sized neck o’ his.

Last to arrive, Bobby takes a place beside me, feigning a yawn to hide the growing fear in his stomach. Bobby's fight or flight smells like burnt toast and Saturday morning cereal.

Reyes finishes and helps him tug his good arm back into his sleeve. Rao stands just behind him, oxygen at ready if needed.

Scott drags in a coarse breath and waves off Rao's offering of air. He looks at Hank – probably the first time the two have been a room together since Utopia was raised from the depths. Hank's indignance ruffles across thick blue fur. “The … formula,” Scott begins, licks pale chapped lips before continuing, “the gas. How'd … change?”

“More aequorin and Fentanyl, less sodium pentathol, and traces of a magnesium-calcite composition. Several sleep additives are what's causing the unconscious --”

“A-Alison,” Cyke gulps, a harsh breath caught in his chest. Skin begins to turn a subtle shade of pink from slowed oxygen. “Ali-son... Monet.. and James. War Room, now.” He leans back for a moment,
just long enough for Rao to force the mask to his mouth. She holds him against the chair while he rakes in several gasps of air. The table stays quiet.

Annoyed, he waves her off, and turns his attention to Namor. “Th-the nets,” he stutters, and shifts through a surge of pain in his side. Head hits table as the pain overwhelms him. Teeth clenched and bared, a desperate hand over his ribs.

“Scott, get back to Med Bay. Now!” Ororo compels him with all the force and fury of her queenly stature. Upon her words, room wide silence breaks with the commotion of like-minded calls. Rogue pushes forward, ready to drag him down there herself, but Scott is undeterred.

His voice barely heard, he continues. “Th-they weren't our nets.”

Namor's arm launches suddenly sideways, a steal beam against Rogue's stomach. The force unexpected, she flies backwards, knocking Kurt into the wall. The beginning of hysteria when Namor pushes a single hand in the air. Jet black eyes dare anyone to interrupt again. Instant silence as the fish king's curiosity tugs sharp features from amusement to dark, dangerous calm. “Explain,” his voice threads into the tense quiet. Arms across his chest, he leans back and watches as Scott pulls another mask-enhanced breath from the machine.

“Nets... too deep... too strong...big enough... whole person. Not ours.” Shaking hands try to aid the image, but Slim's still too weak. “Emma. Help.”

She gives Rao side-eye for lettin' him up here before placing her hand against fevered forehead. “There's no way that our nets could have captured the Atlanteans. Our nets are a prototype, special made for catching smaller, sustainable fish. Too small to surround a full grown person, and the woven-in floats keep the nets from going more than a few feet below the surface. Even if the floats were to fail, due to worries of dolphin entanglement, the weave should have been weak enough for any of your people to break.”

Scott nods behind the mask, motioning for her to continue. “Lights.”

“And,” she continues, trying to collect feverish, drug addled thoughts, “After we added the lights, the problem disappeared.” Emma pauses, looks down at Cyke with a spark of insight. “Because the trap had been sprung. The Atlanteans would have seen the differences in the nets.”

Namor arches one eyebrow. His words deliberately threatening. “If this is true, then you withheld knowledge of a direct threat to my kingdom.”

Emma smiles. Scott remains as controlled as he can through jagged breath and spikes of pain. “Thought you... just... being... an ass.” Namor rubs his chin in thought, deciding if he wants to take offense or not. I think he's tippin' towards. We all do. Namor's face angles down into anger, and though Cyclops attempts a stare down, he's way too sick to give any impression of threat or intimidation. We brace for Imperius Rex. Each of us powerin' up, poppin' claws, steelin' strength, and preparing for whatever Storm's gonna lash out.

Thank goodness for fresh arrivals.

Ali, James, and Monet arrive, breakin' the rage. A weak gesture towards Bets, and with Emma's help, Scott gets them lined up away from the windows. A flip of light switch and screens, a Dazzler produced blue and white blend, and Psylocke, Warpath, and Monet light up like Christmas in Nantucket. Veins and vessels pump phosphorescent blood from the tips of their bare toes to the tips of their noses. Monet glows the brightest.
“But why?” Bobby breaks the silence.

“Catch ... Te-telepath... Osborne...testing. I th-th-think,” Scott manages before another burst of forced air. He waves away Rao's hand. “Betsy... knife... shoom.”

“Scott,” Emma soothes, “let me help.”

Mask back on, Emma lays out Scott's thoughts on what he's concluded thus far. The nets were meant to target Namor, capture him for whatever purpose, but the lights shifted those plans into the gas.

“Glow-in-the-dark, a truth serum, and a zombie drug, turned to gaseous form,” Emma explains slowly through Scott's mangled thoughts.

“Paranoia and speculation. The compounds aren't potent enough to intend their purposes,” Beast rationalizes, his golden eyes holding the weight of his grudge like an ocean full o' anvils.

“Yet!” Emma warns and holds Hank's gaze before turning to the rest of us. Dignified lips pinch with worry. “The clue lies in the telepaths. James was dosed during unintended combat, Betsy and Monet on purpose.”

Storm's eyes narrow with speculation. “There was psionic backlash when Betsy struck the mech.”

Emma strings together Scott's thoughts before speaking again. “Exactly. The gas needs to be re-tested for three specific criteria: if it can be tracked; if it can be used to inhibit telepathic involvement; and with adjustments, if it can be used to control a telepath.”

“What about the bombs?” Warren asks. “How do they fit in?”

Emma is silent for long moments, her hand upon Scott's forehead. “Right now, let's assume four targets. Namor, myself – not him - me, San Francisco, and Utopia.” She pauses, her exquisite features sparkling with amusement. “But don't worry,” she smiles. “Cyclops has a plan.”
Salt heavy ocean breeze and the dimmed glow of sunset. I hear the kids playin' basketball in the distance. First time I've sat out here on the edge of the rock, lookin' out over it all. And though everything points to the opposite, I hope it won't be the last. I can see what it means to him, what drives him to death's door. This spill o' quiet, this little moment of freedom, a breath. Yeah, a breath. Deep salt air and the lappin' of waves. One moment when we're not lookin' over our shoulders for Sentinels or Marauders or Reavers or Brotherhoods. One moment where we ain't worried about a sapien comin' at us ready to beat our ass for bein' different. This ain't Xavier's dream, this is ours.

“If you don't talk sense into that man,” 'Ro calls from above, “then I will take drastic measures to make him listen.” Aggravated as heck from no sleep and a day dealin' with Cyke, her usual serene features are on the verge of tantrum. I ain't quite sure what happened, and not sure I want to know considering the pops and cracks of static floating about her, but... Yeah. I'm gonna kill Proudstar.

A heavy sigh and knowing grin, I push back on elbows to look up at her. For all her recent inclination to royal demeanor, it's nice to see the scrapper back in force. Fists balled up and thick red lips drawn up into a snarl over teeth, the way the crease of brow angles down against whisper blue eyes. She's a sight to behold. “He ain't goin' back to Med Bay, darlin','” I say with a chuckle. “Not until this is over.”

“I don't care about Med Bay. If he wants to suffer – He can die for all I care,” she growls. I draw my mouth into the shape of speculation and reproach – a one sided twist of lips hedged up in a closed lip scowl. Her temper calms with the regret of her words, and Ororo Munroe settles back down to earth. High heeled boots tap against stone as she approaches and takes a seat beside me. A deep breath and she lets the ocean wind flow against her ebon skin, wafting back snow white hair from her shoulders. She smiles with the breeze, letting it wash away her angst and exasperation for long, peaceful minutes.

“He wants to use Megan and Noriko as bait for Osborne,” she explains after her tempest has eased. She notes my dubiety with a quick lift of brows.

“That ain't good.”

“I agree, but Scott and Emma have already talked the girls into it, and I need help talking them out.”

“Wait, wait,” I pause, two fingers in the air. “What exactly's the plan? Nori, yeah, she's a brawler, but Pixie ain't one to stick her neck out for a fight. Why them as bait and not me or Drake or
someone else?”

Storm's eyes mirror the clouds overhead – dark with just a hint of danger. “Scott doesn't think that Osborne knows their true powers. He considered using Julian, but that would mean talking to Charles, and Scott's still refusing -”

“Been on patrol eight hours, hon. Back up. Start from the beginning.”

“Even without clear evidence, Scott thinks that Osborne is configuring the gas to control telepaths,” she explains. “Hence, why he's not sending telepaths into the field right now.”

“Yeah, I know. Made sense at the meeting, makes sense now. The drug combination -”

“Which Beast says will never work -”

“Which Beast says will never work,” I placate with a smooth dip of my head, “Scott's worry still makes sense. If Osborne did get control of Monet, Bets, Xi'an, any of 'em, then it could do a lot of damage.”

“Agreed. However, Henry is the scientist. He's analyzed the gas a hundred different ways, and Scott-”

“I don't want the tit for tat between McCoy and Slim,” I caution, lettin' her know that I'll leave if this is just another fountain o' drama instead of something I should be seriously worried about. “What's the plan?”

“Noriko will be captured first, with Martha giving the illusion that Surge has telepathic powers.”


“Once Osborne thinks Nori's a telepath, he'll capture her, gas her. We get a new sample, and possibly information.”

Storm's not pleased, but I smile at the genius of it. “Because Osborne'll be gassin' Nori instead o' Martha. Nori'll be out cold, Martha still runnin' strong. If he does her like he did Monet, then -- What's Pix got to do with it?”

“If Surge's capture fails to get what Cyclops needs, he'll send in Megan. Emma will fake Pixie's telepathy. She'll act as if she's controlled, and continue to gather information,” Storm pauses, waits for the plan to settle over me. I guess it don't settle quick enough, 'cause Storm's eyes grow even darker. “Pixie will remain in Osborne's employ until Scott has enough information to diffuse the scheme.”

“He's not thinking properly, Logan. He's too sick to think properly. This plan... It ignores too much information he already has on hand, and it puts Pixie in grave danger.” Storm knows that though I'm playin' it calm now, sooner or later, I'm gonna react. She just doesn't know how.

Of course, I don't know either. Over the years, I trained a lot o' kids to fight – Kitty and Jubilee to name a couple, but Pix... Megan Gwynn ain't a fighter. She's a little butterfly with magic dust, a soul dagger she didn't want, and a teleportation spell. “I'll talk to him,” I concede with enough of a lilt that I leave the 'but' implied. Ororo accepts it and flies off to clear her mind of the night's aggravation.

Scott sits at the head of the table in the screen-darkened War Room. Alone. Silent, save for the soft, unsteady gasps of air he's managin' to pull into infected lungs. Still hooked up to antibiotics. A plate of untouched food pushed out of the way. A cup of coffee. A stack of papers to one side of the table,
a laptop on the other. Surrounded by white boards with dozens of marked up maps and other lists. He moves a cursor across a screen of buildings, clicks down, and pulls the screen to view buildings further left. For long seconds, he stares at the new screen before zooming in.

He looks to the right at one of the white boards. Carefully, balancing himself on the table with his good hand, and wrapping his cast around the IV stand, he limps the three step gap between himself and the board. But, now he faces a different problem.

He picks up one of four green markers, holds it next to the map, puts it down. Picks up a blue one, then a black one, another green one. Too many shades on the board for him to tell the difference. A breathless attempt at irritated laughter. An attempt that gargsles the fluid in his lungs and steals his air. He crushes his fingers against his chest, as if trying to pull the breath back into his lungs. His knees start shakin’. Dizzy, he spins, knocking markers to the floor, tippin’ over the IV stand, and reaching for the table.

“Damn it, Cyke. Now, you’re just bein’ a dickhead with this shit,” I scold as I rush across the room to catch him before he falls. He collapses into my arms, head dropped against my shoulder. I pull him back over to the chair, oxygen mask over his face. Yeah, I’m past pity. I’m pissed. One thing to burst out of his bed at three in the mornin’ and threaten Rao into bringing him up here; quite another to stay up here actin' like his pigheaded-ain't-nothin'-wrong-I-won't-ask-for-help-because-I'm-too-proud-shit is the only thing keepin' the boat rowin'. “This ain't stubborn, Slim. This is flat out stupid. You need-”

“Gr-gr-n di-m-d,” he whisps and gestures to the white board.

No idea why I give in. It's not like he can punch me, kick me, beam me or anything else right now. Plus, I know better. I should be dragging his sorry ass back down to Med Bay, strappin' him to a bed, and making sure the doc doses him hard enough that he sleeps for a month. But, I don't. All my piques and peeves, and I find myself drawin' a damned green diamond on the map, then a blue square, then a yellow circle, then... Shit. Shoot me now and end my misery. I've completely lost my head when it comes to Scott fucking Summers.

An hour later, he finally stops. “Th-tha-k you.”

“Cyke, you-”

He beckons me close with lethargic fingers, barely a gesture, but I notice. “Y-You need to p-pr-pr-prote-ct P-pix -n- N-ori,” he stutters, leanin' his body to the right to close the distance. He smells like sanitizer, blood, and soap. The corner of his lips faintly blushed with blue. Sweat beads down his jaw. Skin pale. “A-ask...Em-ma,” he nods, hoping I will understand.

“I gotcha,” I say softly. He's desperate. I can see it, ruby lenses or not, I can see the desperation. He's only worn this look five times in his life that I know of – twice for Jeannie, once for Maddie, once for his son, and once for a bus full o' depowered kids. Each time, he watched his world go up in flames, turn to ash in his hands. It's a look that's so scared o' failing, so frightened of losing everything, that he'll do anything – give his life – to stop it. Without anger, without sarcasm, just a nice, soft, sorry tone, ‘I'm takin' you back to Rao now. No arguments.”

A soft nod.
“She's a teleporter,” Emma bites back, jamming her finger to the table. Her anger – while it makes the rest of us take a step back – only serves to heighten Namor's libido. Tongue drawing lasciviously back and forth across his lower lip, black eyes perked with beguilement, I swear if he didn't have some royal code to live up to, he'da tossed Emma over his shoulder five minutes ago and disappeared to beer knows where and had his way with her.

“That's why he chose her,” Emma continues. Flickers of diamond cast over human flesh, splaying small, bright rainbows across Storm's dark skin. “If there is danger – and trust me, my girls and I will be with her the whole time in case there is– she'll be able to teleport out. That's the point. That's why he needs her.”

Kurt raises his hand politely in hopes of not garnering further temper from either Storm or Emma. Already the room's a wreck from their argument. Chairs pushed over, white boards knocked down, shattered windows, a few broken screens. Scott's papers litter the floor under mugs of spilled coffee and smashed donuts. It's been a helluva meeting. “Why not use me?” Elf speaks softly. “I volunteer -”

“Because Osborne knows that you're not a telepath,” Emma fumes. “If we don't --”

Warren chips in, hoping to assuage some of the enmity himself. “I have questions for both of you.” He proffers up a stern, pacifying look to both Emma and Storm before dragging a chair from the floor and taking a seat. He runs his hand through thick, wavy, blonde hair and waits patiently for the rest of head table to do the same. A long, uncomfortable silence. A boardroom tactic. Make 'em wait on you, make 'em focus as you rub your chin and collect your thoughts. Act like your gonna speak, but don't. Wait until they're itchin' to hear your voice.

At first, I don't think it'll work. There's Namor to consider. Namor'd usually be the first to have some snide remark rollin' off his tongue, but lucky for Warren, Namor's still dug down deep in thoughts of jello fights and mud wrastlin' to even notice the fight's gone quiet. He's still sittin' there staring at Emma's ass hoping Drake will joke about biting it again.

The second reason this is so damn genius is that it's different from Storm and her favorite electrifying method of control. Storm's threats can be pretty terrifying, but her bluffs at unleashing the weather have been called one too many times over the past couple o' days. Metal room, metal floor. She's not one to toss the whole jar because a single cookie crumbled. And third, it's also different from Scott,
who depending on the day, will either lecture, yell, count, and blow people to Michigan if they don't stop the bickerin' and start listenin'. He doesn't bluff, so it works for him, but Worthington's method is working just as well.

Eventually, Namor realizes that the room's gone quiet. This is when Warren speaks again. “Before I ask my questions,” Warren starts – another board room tactic: let 'em know you're not done before you start, that you've got priority - “Emma, you mentioned teams that would be on hand for both Pixie and Surge. Explain those, please.”

Emma – having been in boardrooms, herself – and Storm – a thief turned goddess turned Queen of Wakanda – both realize what Warren's doing. It's a tactic they've both seen played out over countless meetings in their respective circles; but Warren played it first, and if they don't play ball, they both come out lookin' bad. Now, it's not a matter of right or wrong, it's a matter of image and respect. Sure, both are acquainted enough with decorum to wriggle out of this, but I have feelin' that ol' flyboy's gotta a few more business cards to toss into the ring.

“For Noriko, it will look like a regular patrol. Sam Guthrie, Hepzibah, and Logan. Dani, Piotr, and Alison will be on standby. If Scott gets the information he needs, then --”

“Explain how Pixie's abduction will be different,” Warren interrupts. Bare facts. Phrases a statement instead of a question. Eyes curious and cold. He retains dominance.

Emma – both elbows on the armrests – folds her hands together trying to wrest control back in her favor. She looks powerful, right now, comfortable, like the world is a big juicy apple sittin' in her back pocket. Her voice as flawless as a pitch perfect chime. “Pixie will flaunt her telepathic powers on afternoon patrols consisting of Rogue, Bobby, and Kurt. She will dance her nights away at the club, while you and Logan wait for her abduction. From there, we will keep telepathic contact with her –posing as her mutant ability and gathering information. Trackers and tough skins will station nearby as backup should we lose that contact. If there is danger, however, Pixie can --”

“First question,” Warren begins, folding his hands in a mirror image of Emma, a deft reminder that he's still the authority right now. “Emma, should a better plan arise, would you accept it?” Direct and to the point, but also a trap. A trap that Emma knows full well she just walked into. Say yes, and it means that Scott's plan could be perceived as weak. Say no, and Scott - via her refusal - comes off looking like a tyrant. She considers her situation carefully. To her left, sensing the trap as well, Ororo smiles. Emma takes a deep breath and cedes complete control to Warren. “Yes.”

Warren then turns to face Ororo, the regalia quickly fades from her face. She knows what's coming next. “Second question. Ororo, do you have a better plan?”

Emma snuffs a smile with fingers pressed to her lips. Side eye to side eye. The low fizz of lightning. “No,” Ororo admits to her shame.

‘Ro's a good leader, but she's lost her grit since becoming a queen. She got used to ease of it – a nation of tech and wealth, where wars can be fought and won from a balcony, a meeting hall, or over some fussy banquet. But, here, on Utopia, we're still slappin' on the bandages, and hopin' we don't bleed out before mornin'. There it's about maintaining peace. Here, it's about survival. Think fast 'cause there ain't no one comin' to rescue you.

Warren walks the room, crossing towards shattered windows. All focus stays on his strict, quiet, boardroom demeanor as he stares out at endless ocean. After more moments of consideration, he addresses head table. “Third question. Does anyone have a better plan?”
Warren makes eye contact with every single person at head table and waits for their definitive answer. Resounding no's all across the room. Not one idea, not one suggestion, comment or complaint. “Thus, there are two plans on the table. Cyclops' plan and Norman Osborne's plan.” Holding two fingers in the air, he makes eye contact again. “Final question. Whose plan is more dangerous?”

If there's one thing I wanna see before I die – well, other than Scott Summers all hot, bothered, and beggin' for more – it's Warren Worthington III in a boardroom showdown against Tony Ironman Stark. I have a gut feeling Warren would walk away with half o' Stark's holdings and his own suit o' armor to boot.
XXVIII

Chapter Summary

Parting storms and best friends.

Chapter Notes

I've really enjoyed writing this, and hopefully someone will enjoy reading it. Yes, there's still more to come.

Two hours. Two fucking hours and the yellin' was still goin' strong. Office door locked, the lot of us waiting in the hallway, half-listenin', half ready to bust inside and break the whole damn thing up.

None of us could ever recall hearin' Scott and Jean fight. Or, Scott and Xavier fight. And never in our wildest dreams could we have imagined sittin' out in the hall - listenin' like flies - as Scott fought both Jean and Xavier.

Voices muffled by thick wood and psionic shields, the most we could make out was a single word: Apocalypse.

Jean had brought Cyclops back from the brink o' possession three days ago, and it'd been non-stop trippin' over glass around him since. Even Alex, who was probably closer to him than any of us sitting here, had no idea what the hell was happening. “He won't talk to me,” he'd worried over breakfast when the first sign of another row between Cyke and Xavier had started up.

“He'd been trying to stop an evil monster from taking over his mind for months,” Lorna whispered with a deep understanding of the pitfalls o' madness and possession. “It's going to take time for him to... be okay.”

But, that was half the problem. There wasn't time. The Genoshan civil war was startin' to bleed over into our world. Riots and protests, calls to arms and legislation. Xavier needed Cyclops more than ever – needed that cool head o' his to march a team into the ruckus and start putting things in order. Summers said no. 'Course Summers was saying no to a lot o' things at the moment – from sleep, to training, to fucking opening his mouth and saying 'Howdy' when you saw him in the hall.

A silent, malefic, ball of acrimony, he stomped the halls and slammed the doors, crowed himself to the roof top at night, and ignored every damn living soul in existence. And from the looks o' things, Jeannie was takin' the brunt of it.

“She cried half the night,” 'Ro explained as the fight raged on behind thick walls. The sound of shattering glass and Jean's soft pleas drew her attention back to the locked office door. A wind shifted against our skin. Storm was ready to end it, but didn't get the chance.

The door flung open with the crimson glare of eyebeam, scattering us all across the floor. Brows
drawn low, heavy breath, mouth drawn up in vehement scowl, Scott kicked at debris and waste, makin' his way towards the door. “Scott!” Jean called to him, her green eyes drippin' tears. She reached out a hand before collapsing under the weight of her sorrow.

“Let him go, Jean,” Xavier said coolly at her side. Sympathetic and soft, he placed a tender hand atop her head. “He'll be back.”

A few minutes later - now that they'd both stopped mufflin' sound perception - I heard the roar of an engine and the squealing of wheels down the driveway.

Scotty wasn't known for holdin' his liquor. Even at his own wedding, he refused champagne, wine, beer, and the good stuff kept stashed under the bar. So, finding him an hour later, snuck up in the corner of some dirty ass bar booth, with whatever pink drink he was scufflin' down, pretty much amused me. “Gonna have to take your keys, Slim,” I remarked with a grunt and slid my way into the seat opposite.

Drunk as a skunk, Cyke's face pummeled through logic and rage. Rage, that I'd found him; logic that he wasn't fit to drive. Logic won out, and with hands blathered by alcohol, he slumped his keys across the table. “Good man,” I gruffed with an amused grin.

Two fingers up, and the waitress came. “Whiskey, straight, and... whatever the hell he's havin'.”

“Go away, Logan,” he slurred, hunchin' himself against the wall and pullin' his feet up on the seat. He drained his glass dry, pecked it on the table, took a deep breath, and then nothin'. I thought for a second he was gonna speak, but his moment of recollection ate his words.

Waitress came back with the drinks. “'Nother round after this,” I told her, placing some bills on the table so she'd keep good watch over us. Cyke grabbed his and drank it half down before I'd gotten off a sip. “Wanna talk about it?” I asked after the silence had drained on too long.

“No.”

“Okay.” I gulped my whiskey, waited for the next round, and ordered another.

“Team needs you, Cyke,” I said after the fourth round tapped empty on the table. I held a hand up to stop the waitress before she could bring another. Ol' One-eye had already drowned his sorrows, and was half-way to drownin' himself.

“Fuck the team,” he slurred quietly. Not the phrase I was expecting, but hearin' that word roll off the boy scout's tongue did some awfully pesky things below my belt. Maybe he'd somehow noticed, and that's why the fuckin' half snort hit his throat, and the disbelievin' half grin snicked his cheek. A long, way-too-fucking-intense silence.

With a solemn sigh, “Jeannie needs you.”

Suddenly, all that bottled up shit he'd been fightin' twisted his face two ways south of Saturday. I couldn't tell if he was gonna yell, scream, cry, hit, punch, beam, laugh, smile or pass out drunk where he sat. That little flood was the single most frightening thing I'd ever seen. Five whole moments of looking at a man whose world had fallen apart so many times, he wasn't sure where he'd put all the pieces. Just when I thought he was gonna break completely, he lowered his head put two fingers against his temple. A deep breath, and like he'd flipped a switch inside his head, he came back to nothin'. Not a tear, flinch, snarl, or pinch of anger. Just flat out nothin'. Terrifying. Absolutely fucking terrifying.

Jeannie met us at the mansion door, her face still pink and swollen from a day of crying her eyeballs
out. She cooed and soothed and whispered that everything was gonna be alright, that she'd help him through this, that no matter what Apocalypse did to him, she still loved him.

Xavier watched from the doorway as Jean got Scott's clumsy, drunk ass over to the boat house. He took a deep breath. His face full o’ worry, he looked up at me. “Thank you for bringing him back.”

“What do you mean she left?” I yell at Kurt. Still pissed over another rainy ass patrol, Kurt holds up his hands in surrender.

“I'm just the messenger,” he blurs out and takes a step back. I sheathe my claws and motion for him to continue.

Kurt shakes blue-black head. This time o' night, it's hard to see the shape of him. Spade crested tail glints and curls under the moonlight, teeth snag bits o’ stars, and yellow eyes glow like a cat's, but the rest of him starts blending in. He walks with me back from the docks. “Ororo really hated Scott's plan.”

Disgusted, I give a little snarl that puts Kurt back on his toes. “Did she even try coming up with a better one?”

“She said her duty lies in Wakanda,” he shrugs sheepishly, ready to pounce back again should I go haywire.


“By the Grace of God,” he says with a bow.

Kurt's real quiet as we continue walking up to the side door. Something’s bothering him, but he ain't ready to tell me yet. So, we walk and keep walking. We skip the side door, walk to the front, then all the way back around again. Him in thought, me just waiting for him to speak. He's done the same for me dozens o’ times, so no big deal that I do this for him. “Do you think it's a good plan?”

“Good, better, best don't matter, Elf. S'only one we got.” One beer down I shake the empty bottle. Kurt takes it, bamf, bamf, he fills my empty hand with another one. “Also gotta remember that this is Cyke. Cyke's plans don't come without fifteen thousand backups in case something goes wrong.”

Kurt nods in agreement, but the worry still pelts across blue-black brow. “True. But, Cyclops is not well. What if this plan is... I don't know... not his best?”

“I'd take one o' Summers' not-best plans over doin' nothin' any day.” Sip of beer, another pass around the asteroid. “Osborne's no slacker. He underestimated us once and damn near lost his shit for it, too. He ain't gonna make that mistake a second time. We gotta be ready.”

Kurt's nerves slowly begin to ease. “Seems so different than before. At the mansion. The X-men, the school.”

“That's because it is different. This ain't jolly time. Wanda did us in real good with her little spell, put us all in deeper than Xavier ever dreamed. Hate and extinction are two different ball games.”

Kurt balances on the long silver guard rail that surrounds the outside walk. Arms out, tail wagging back and forth, he does a series of black-flips that set him on course for the ocean behind us, then flip-twists forward until he's back where he started. A ta-da moment. Arms stretched up over his head, and then a bow, he smiles. Elf's way of relieving pressure. Now comes the hard stuff.

Jumping back down, we continue our walk. “I talked to Charles today,” he says softly. “He
desperately wants to see Scott, but Emma won't allow it.”

I nod. “I'm sure Em's got her reasons.”

“Still,” he says with a sigh. “To see their falling out, it hurts my heart. Charles loves Scott like a son. He deserves better.”

Kurt notices my apprehension. Dark tail curls up around his waist like a little hug. Yellow eyes pierce the darkness with a worried squint. “He say somethin' about that meeting?” I ask, trying to get a better gauge on the situation before I put my foot in my mouth.

Kurt shakes his head. “No. It was in his eyes. He was very sad, almost lost. I offered to pray with him, but he refused.” Kurt takes a final moment of reflection before pulling a wide smile from the depths of his soul. “Noriko and Martha are practicing their telepathic mirage. I've heard it's fun to watch.”

“Yeah?” I say, perking my brow with interest.

“Martha has quite the sense of humor. Bobby said that he caught Noriko doing the chicken dance in the boy's bathroom.” Kurt rubs his hands in devilish delight. I can smell the prank war coming from a mile away.
I stand at the stairs going down to Med Bay. For some reason, I can't seem to take 'em. Should be easy right? Has been since this shit started. One step, then another. Then another. Then another. And at the bottom, Rao or Reyes are gonna scuttle me around doin' this or that before we get Scott cleaned back up and smellin' like a medicine cabinet. Count some sheep, then dredge back up, and start all over again.

But, here I am. Stalled out. Lookin' down, dreadin' to go.

I keep telling myself that Scott Summers isn't a burden. That he's not some world chained on my back; that I'm not some pack mule he's ridin' around. Hell, if anything, he's not burden enough. If he'd just let us take some of the weight off... But, would we take it? It's nice when he tells Anole that he's on chicken coop duty for the week, and Victor doesn't complain. But, it was Scott's scheming and bartering that got us the chickens in the first place. His research that went into the blue prints for the coop, and his caution that makes sure the eggs are divvied out without a fight. It's his forethought that buys feed and incubators from the mainland, and his calculations that will give us a whole new flock o’ birds by the beginning of winter. I'm not so sure I could keep up with all that, not with everything else at the same time.

So, why am I still standing here?

Yeah, this martyr shit that he's been pullin' leaves a bad taste, but... I understand it. I see where it's coming from. One hundred and ninety eight games o' strat and tacs are playin' simultaneously in his head right now. One ninety eight people that need to be fed, warmed, and watered; one ninety eight lives that need to be protected and kept alive. And we're all lookin' at him for the answers. Sure, we're down in the trenches doin' the dirty work while he's sittin' up in the office, but... A hundred and ninety eight people at stake, and he refuses to ask for help to figure it all out. 'Course we aren't offering either. Hell, we don't even know what's left to offer. He's got so many plans coming and going that...

Why the fuck am I still standing here?

“He's a difficult patient, isn't he?” Rao quips at the bottom of the stairs. Dark brown eyes - a hint o’ warmth and late night weariness – look up at me in the amber-lidded darkness. A palm-down beckoning of her hand, and my feet start moving again. She gestures to the cloth and sanitizer and goes about her business.
He's looking better today than he has been. Fever's down a touch, breath isn't as gargly. Cut over his eye isn't as puffy, the one down his jaw just an itchy scab. Bruises have faded a little over the past few days, and stitch wounds aren't quite as red.

“It took a while,” Rao speaks from somewhere in the supply room, “but, I finally discovered the proper dose and combination of antibiotics that he needed.” I can see her midst the shelves checking her supplies, marking what she needs down on a sturdy red clipboard. “Of course, I would have had it figured out much earlier had he stopped fighting me, but in the end...”

I go ahead and start with the nightly shave before she's finished. Not much in the mood to be hassled about doing this or that, and figure if I keep busy here, she won't run me too much. Shaving cream and razor blade, I take my time here to avoid nicking cuts and scabs. Lifting up the mask, I go a little faster, taking breaks when the little beep on the monitor goes blue – a warning that oxygen levels are dropping – wait until it's green again, and then continue. By the end, his face is how it should be. Smooth skin with the faint lines drawn from the edges of his nose down towards the corners of his mouth, the fish hook shaped scar just up under the soft of his chin, the soft pinkish lips, the tranquil lines of sienna brow. But, it's a feint, isn't it. As serene as his face looks under this amber light - as peaceful as Rao's bag o' slumber has made him – his mind's still runnin' ten thousand miles a minute, and I've no idea what to do for him.

The soft tap of heels. Rao returns. Bedding, bathing, changing. All work and business, which isn't a bad thing right now 'cause I jumped off shore about thirty minutes ago, and I'm startin' to drown.

She pulls a chair to the opposite side of the bed, holds up a finger in the air, then disappears. She comes back some minutes later carrying a large tupperware lined with napkins. The smell as she lifts the lid turns my mouth into the Mississippi. “Pyaj kachori,” she explains as she hands me the small ball of onion-stuffed bread. “Do you like it?” she asks and offers me another.

“Funny story,” she begins, “During an X-Club briefing, we got off topic, and I mentioned how much I loved making these with my mother. A week later, Piotr brought down a large box, sat it on the floor and left without a word. It contained all the ingredients I needed to make a dozen different kinds of kachori. I never asked for them, never begged, never complained. Cyclops simply fulfilled a need that I didn't know existed until I made my first batch. The memories that came with the smell of those spices, it was indescribable. I was a little girl again, helping my mother roll out the dough, waiting on pins and needles for the oil to heat.” She closes her eyes as she remembers, a close-lipped smile and head tipped as if smelling those spices all over again.

She returns to reality moments later, her eyes still lodged in some part of that memory, still happy, still dreamin'. “A part of me wonders if I would have given up on Utopia by now if not for that box. Life here is far more hectic than my old lab, but that box...” Prim, whimsical voice trails off with a smile. “You should go get some rest, Logan. I'll keep watch tonight.”
XXX

Chapter Summary

Plans often go awry.

Chapter Notes

Some action to pull you along.

Three mechs. A knock to the head that has me seein' Madonna, Mickey Mouse, and Michelob Light. The painful crack of skull against concrete. A bunch of screamin'. The smell of some mad-nasty-Frankenstein-Dolittle-floor-cleaner-shit.

“They grabbed Nori!” I yell into com to keep up the illusion. “Find her! Go, go, go!”

After yesterday's fiasco with the tele-mirage, I wasn't sure the plan was going to work. After a day of practice, Martha and Nori had said they were ready. I had doubts. Emma didn't. Patrol went down, but instead o' psi-blastin' the mechs, Surge ended up using her lightning pulses. Not good. So, tonight's abduction, that it went it down, that they grabbed her... Either Osborne's pack o' mech-headed chew toys are just plain stupid when it comes to psions, or Osborne's onto us. I'm leaning towards the latter.

“Cannonball,” Hepzibah purrs into com, “Location lock?”

Overhead, Sam blasts through the air, zig-zagging this way and that, settin' down on roofs, then blastin' off again. All the while, in our minds, Martha's flashin' pictures through Noriko's on-again-off-again half-dazed gaze. An alleyway, a garbage can, a side street. An oak tree on the sidewalk. An old style barber shop pole. Sidewalk. Sidewalk with an edge o' grass. Three green cars parallel parked. The double yellow lines of another road. Then black.

Martha's voiceless thoughts nudge into our minds – more like notions than actual words; just the sudden knowledge of what she's tryin' to express, sorta like how you know there's a monster in the closet. You don't see it, you don't hear it, you just know. And, now we know that Noriko's flat unconscious.

Martha's unflappable though, and through her mind link, she's sendin' out the feels. The way Noriko's boots are still buzzin' across pavement. A hit, bump, lift in the air, then more buzzin'. A dulled breeze met by an open one. Long time of more grating at the boot, pressure on ankles and wrists, then stillness. Martha's tryin' to kick-start Nori's auditory processes, but isn't meetin' with success.

“We find the barber shop pole,” Sam issues through the link. Still playin' decoy search-and-rescue, he continues his fiery flight through the sky.

“What is this barber shop pole?” Hepzibah questions, her voice like gingered milk, smooth and
spicy, and a hint of danger.


Hep ain't from earth. Though Scott's bad-ass-space-pirate-absentee-daddy-o probably educated her about earthly customs, I doubt those lessons included candy canes. And, if Christopher Summers did mention candy canes, I doubt he had sugar plums, reindeer, or twinklin' lights in mind. I worry for Sam's innocence as much as I do Piotr's.

“What is candy cane?” she asks, givin' my poor old heart – and Sam's Christmas spirit - much needed relief.

Sam growls in exasperation. “Hep, look for the three green cars. Logan, the barber pole. I'll keep an eye out for mechs.”

Draggin' myself from the alley floor, I swipe the dirt from my uniform and try to get my bearings. Mechs came from up top, the low rise roof of the laundromat to my right. They gassed me, knocked me out, and took off, but whether they went north or south, I can't tell. The alley's a mess on both sides – strewn garbage and broken electronics, a black tailed kitty-cat, and a cockroach the size of my fist.

Plus, the fact that Cannonball hasn't spotted anything yet starts wormin' through the back of my mind. Gas gun jokers don't wear the suits, least not that we've seen so far, but the mechs? Three mechs rampagin' down open streets shouldn't be hard to spot, smell, or track. Yet, each time we come across 'em, we lose 'em and spend the next hour hunting them down. Something's not right.

I get myself to the roof, have a looksie. Streets on both sides of the alley look about the same. A couple o' pharmacies, dry cleaners, a pawn shop, bail bondsman. A food mart and a second-hand clothing shop to the north, a liquor store and head shop to the south. I go north. Seems more the part o' town for a haircut. Hit an alley across the street, and now I've got a four-way decision. North, south, east, west. Martha's pictures didn't come with any directional sense, and with the moon half-clouded by a comin' storm, I can't go by shadows.

An unsettling flash o' red map across the mind-link displays an overlap of faint orange triangle and a dark colored square. A finger brushes a path through the streets. “Wolverine,” Martha shivers into our thoughts. Reset, another path drawn. “Hezibah.” Reset, another path. “Cannonball.”

“Martha, you okay?” Sam's concern floats through our thoughts. “You aren't hemorrhagin', are ya?”

But, I recognize the pattern. Yellow circles for possible mech sightings. Blue squares for possible storage sights. “Cyclops?”

Thoughts still heavy with three days sleep, Slim's words spark static across our com-links. “Barber shop, street parking, alleyway, parking lot. You're looking for the abandoned glass factory to the northwest. Switch to coms. Martha's breaking the link to get Surge back in play. Recon until your back up arrives.”

Sam hunkers down at the edge of the glass factory parking lot, a large, open, unlit space. A drug deal goes down one side of the lot – a rusted up white Chevette and a sky blue Cadillac. Five men, two guns, a wad o' cash, and a small white envelope. “They got here two minutes ago,” Sam explains as I settle to haunches beside him. “Don't think they're involved.”

The musty odor of damp fur signals Hep's arrival. Tail a-swish, her feline features grow tense with awareness, a panther lookin' for prey. Reflective green eyes study the unwelcomed party in the
corner of the lot. “Scare off?” she purrs.

Sam shakes his head. “Nah. Leave ’em be. They'll take off on their own.” Blue eyes scan the rest of the lot, looking for a way to get closer without being seen. Farm boy's finger points to a snarl of overgrown bushes and tipped over dumpster to the right of the building. He looks at Hep. “Will that get you on the roof?”

Hepzibah tilts her head to the left; drawn-slit eyes dart back and forth between the dumpster and the roof top. A fanged smile. “How you say? Easy cheese pie?”

Sam's cheeks turn up with a toothy grin. Adjusting his goggles, he gives the nod and Hep sprints through the dark shadows at the edge of the lot. She disappears into a cop of trees, a flash of silver fur, then gone again. With a firm gaze on the dumpster, Sam holds his breath for long moments, and exhales when the moon-glow of Hep's eyes finally peak again through the darkness. A hotfooted dash with tail pert in the air, a duck and roll and Hep snugs herself beside the shadowed dumpster.

“All clear from where I'm sittin',” Sam breathes into the com.

Clawed hands grip the edge the of the dumpster, testing the tilt for sound. Sturdy as a rock. A straight vertical jump, Hepzibah lands at the center of the dumpster, not realizing what the sudden impact will do. An empty, metallic bang suddenly echoes through the lot. Hep ducks down quick and scans the area for invaders.


“Cyclops,” Sam whispers into coms. “We have a problem.”

A dozen mechs, a trail o' blood, and Nori's life in danger. Without a word spoken yet, I can feel the clamp tight pressure buildin' behind red lenses. I can see Summers now as Sam explains the situation - slight crease of brow; long fingers drummin' air as the information sings through com; the rollin’ of tension over scabbed up jaw line. Surge is still down, back up ain't arrived, and some asshole is bleedin' to death in the middle of it all.

Glad I'm not in that room right now. Silence.

“Go.” Cyke's tired words eek into com. “Forget recon. Get the victim clear. Dani, ETA?”

“Three minutes,” she answers.

“Colossus, Dazzler?”

Ali's breathless huffs kick com static. “Bit longer than that. We're still half way across town.”

Unphased by the set back, Cyclops' voice continues to read in-control. “Dani, Sam, whoever gets clear first, the nearest emergency room is three miles southeast. Evacuate the civilian and return ASAP. Updates, people.”

Updates are hard when bashing mechs. But we give 'em as we can. “Three dozen mechs up top total,” Sam counts as he blasts across the parking lot. He crashes into the first mech with a resounding boom, ripping up circuits as he goes. Following Cyke's earlier tac, he tries to get the mechs to follow him across the lot and away from the gunshot guy. A few follow, most don't.

“Gas guns?” Cyke asks.
“Not yet,” I answer, still closing the gap between me and the river of blood. More mechs pour out of the factory. “Another five mechs.”

Near the factory entrance, Hep is waging her own little battle against the robot army, leaving the five newcomers to pick and choose their fights at will. “Is this rat smell?” Hep puffs between deft kicks and a blast of laser-beam-via-too-cool-for-school-space-gun.

“Yeah, darlin'. This is rat smell.” A grim slice of laughter, and I bash through mechanized knee joints, aiming for a left neck. I miss.

Thrown to the ground, I twist-roll-dodge a stomp to the head. “Ain't no way we missed a nest this large, Cyke. Somethin's wrong.”

“Heard,” Scott quiets. His way of telling us that this wasn't unexpected, but he's not going to waste focus by giving us details right now.

Com silence as the bash-n-gash continues. Dani disappears almost as soon as she arrives, trottin' off in the air with gunshot guy over her shoulder. Leaves the rest of us with heckuva a mess, but at least it's one less thing to worry about. That is, until.. “Gas guns!” Sam raises the alarm.

“How many?” Cyke perks.

“Four.”

“Good. Four chances for a clean one.” And, the asshole's back. No matter that it's three against an army of B-movie-esque-robot-suit-wearin'-blunder-duffs, he's more worried about getting his damn gun. “Dani, return ETA?”

“Four minutes, Cyclops.”

“You've got two,” he issues without anger or irony.

Another set o' knees, two more left necks. The hard spot is the back right shoulder. And the gas. Two on Hep, two rumbling up the lot towards me. Hep'll go down. I won't. “Sam, get her outta there,” I warn him just as the jerk-off with a gun pulls the trigger. Luckily Hepzibah notices and springs up high just as Cannonball reaches over head. Catching her outstretched arms in a straight zoom, Sam doubles back towards the gun after a sharp right hand turn. Agile feet at ready, Hep locks ankles under the jerkwad's shoulders, a razor turn towards the sky, and Hep drops the bastard on the roof. Fucking genius.

One gun outta play, Dani sets down just in time to rip the straps off the asshat's back, catch the gun, and knock him senseless. Cannonball and Hepzibah repeat their grab-n-go three more times. “Four clean guns, Cyclops,” Dani calls through com.

“Good,” is all he says. Don't know if he's tired or busy, but a single word without a command to follow ain't like him.

Mechs are near cleaned up by the time Colossus and Dazzler arrive. A dozen and a half left, Dani, Pete and Ali are pissed as hell, so Hep, Sam and I leave them to their aggression. “We're in, Cyclops,” Sam whispers as we set foot in the building.

“Careful,” he warns us, “Sounds like seven mechs down below.” Which means that Martha's got her spy-psi runnin' through the back of Nori's mind. “Could be more.”

“Heard.” A series of hand gestures later, and I'm scouting left, Hep's going right. Recon only, don't
engage. Sam waves us off and waits by the door in case the others come in.

Factory's been down for years, or so I guess by the smell. Most of the machinery's been stripped o' copper, silver, and good metals. Glass crunches underfoot – both from leftover stock and the broken windows above. I follow the tracks the mech army made on their way out the door. Further in, the darker it gets, but the trail's broad enough that I don't need much light.

Back towards the far end of the building, comin' up from the floor, I catch a very, very faint whiff of powder fresh deodorant. "Think I found Surge," I whisper, dropping to the floor, and pressing my ear to the ground. No noise, no other scent than the faint trace of Nori.

Hep settles in beside me and takes a listen, too. She doesn't hear anything either. Tension rises, and Sam tells us to wait for the others. Seven mechs won't be much of a challenge, but Noriko's down there, and our goal right now is to get her out alive and unharmed.

A whoosh-zoom-air sound suddenly hits our brains and then silence followed by Cyke's firm-as-concrete-thoughts. "Cannonball, you're all clear. Go get Nori and bring me those guns." Our lack of confirmation clues him into our hesitation. "That sound? That was a teleport. The mechs have left the building."

"A teleporter? But who would--" Sam begs into the link.


'Course I'm not Petey. I don't just cough and spew air. Nah. I curse. "Fuck."

Screens down in the War Room. A single overhead light casts a soft yellow glow across the paper-strewn table and white boards. If I didn't know him better, I'd think the place was empty, but this is Cyke's think-light. No planning, no scheming, just sittin' quiet and lettin' all those clues coagulate into some type o' viability. Something he can use.

He acknowledges my presence with a slight turn of head, just to the left and up. It ain't much, but this is Scott Summers. Not-much means a whole helluva lot. He doesn't ask. I just tell. "Nori's unconscious, but checks out okay. Nemesis is analyzing the gas and adjusting the antidote."

He nods. I take a seat at the corner of the table, note the half-buttoned shirt and wrinkled pants, the way he's still leanin' to one side, and the sleep-mussed hair. "Martha drag you up here?"

"Ernst."

Practiced stoicism be damned, he can't stop the yawn that hinges his jaw.

"Rao cleared you for duty?" He doesn't answer, which means he escaped. Again. Even so, he's looking better. Skin's back to its normal sun-washed pale, lips are the proper shade of nude-pink, breath's steady and even without so much as a hiss. More than that is the hard shape of his jaw, the long steel line of bite-down and intensity. "If you get sick again--"

"I'm fine, Logan," he says with another yawn. For a second, I think he's going to say something else, but he bites back down and stares up at the white board maps. "With Porter in the mix, Osborne could be anywhere."

"We've been runnin' on the assumption that this is Osborne, but what if this is -"
“The guns are an old SHIELD design from WWII. Three were sold at an auction three days after we defeated him. Nemesis’ contact confirmed two days ago that Osborne was the buyer.”

“Okay, but how's that -” And then it dawns on me. “That kind of tech is easier and cheaper to mass produce than modern tech.”

Scott nods. “Meaning this isn't HAMMER associated, this is personal. So, we can assume he's not using a government base for this.” He rubs long fingers across stubbled chin. It's a tell. Frustration. Though his face remains unchanged - his mouth a lean, long line of nothin’ - that speck of movement betrays deeper problems.

“I'm a big boy, Cyke. Go ahead and spill it.”

A deep breath, visor turns up to the ceiling. “I can't send Megan. With Vanisher active and no lead on a possible base of operations...” He turns his focus back to the maps - the circles and diamonds, squares and triangles – looking for something's that he's missed. The key that will bring sense to this mess. A long silence as his thoughts rehash the trove of mission information stashed in his head.

His fingers start moving as if tweaking an invisible computer screen - placing a fact here, pushing a detail over there, twisting vision, pulling hypothesis. It's a small, silent symphony of tactics conducted by a too-fast brain. Head bent low, his visor focused on the table ahead, fingers and hands twitch and shake as he pieces together the puzzle. A rare, usually private sight. Only a handful of X-men have ever had the privilege of watching think-light-Cyke in the moment. Ten minutes later, both hands still the air, a long pause. And with a slight sigh, a frustrated knuckle knocks three times against the table. He's still not seeing something.

And, the idiot that I am - with this whole fucking shitstorm hanging over top of us – that's the moment I pick to put my hand on his knee, run it all the way up his thigh, and cop another feel of the stones and stick wavin' free under wrinkled beige cotton. A little squeeze to let him know I'm alive, and a shit-eatin' grin to let him know I care.

Yeah, I'm an ass, and I no doubt deserve the fucking eyebeam to the head that I get for doing it. But, it ruffles his feathers, something I don't expect.

Reflexes still slowed by injury and illness, Scott can't make it out of his chair. Stuck in a twisted sit, brow drawn down, mouth hung open, cheeks flushed three shades of hotness, his hand stays poised on his visor ready to shoot me again if I make another move. Breath fast and shallow, he has no idea what to do or say.

So, I start laughing, which only throws him further for a loop. A deep, rumbling belly laugh that shakes my ribs so hard they hurt. I roll myself off the floor with hands held up in defeat. I take three steps back, reorient the chair, and take a bow. “G'night, Cyke. Good to have you back.”

And, then I leave. Just like that. Still gigglin' to myself, I jog off down the hall before he can recover enough to beam my ass to back to Canada.
XXXI

Chapter Summary

The boss is back. Emma's fed up.

Chapter Notes

Good to see you're still here?

Kavita Rao. Odd to see her up and out of Med Bay or X-Club. High heels tap-tap-tap on the floor, hands dug deep in pockets, clicking a hidden ball point pen as she speeds back to her more comfortable surroundings. She's tired, perturbed, and none too happy with I-have-a-feeling-who.

“Hey, uh-” Worried that Scott'd gone haywire last night, I catch up to her. “He didn't --”

Rao proffers up a deep red smirk. “It was a well-thought out plan that involved little Ernst, a non-existent bile-spewing mutant, and four hours of my evening. I am now severely behind in my work.” She grabs my arm in a playfully threatening grip. “Mark my words, the next time - and there will be a next time - I will be prepared for him.” Her laughter cartoon-maniacal, she taps her heels back down the hall and disappears.

A hole in my shoe, a slop of slimy scrambled eggs, and an evil scientist. Yeah. That's my morning. How's yours?

I can smell the aftershave from the hallway, a good sign that Scott managed to drag himself away long enough to get cleaned up. Boy, I've missed that scent. Fresh winter laundry with a touch of pine and the deep down smell of good, rich earth. I stand there, taking a much-needed moment to let it wash over me, remind me of what I want to protect.

Namor files past me leaving a lingering waft of seaweed and fish gills in his wake. Stupid asshat. Head held high, the arrogant fuck barely steps in the door before he says, “Oh, you survived. And, here I had hopes to finally take the diamond for myself.”

“Screw you, Namor,” Emma sneers in response.

“If you must,” the fish-king's slick voice peels back.

I decide I better get in there before the circus starts. I hope someone brought peanuts.

“Yeah, and you can shove this up your arse.” Emma throws a single finger in the air.

Namor pulls sharp chin up, eyes in tiny squints. He considers the prospect. “Very well,” he says at length, with the cool, calm tone of ocean depth, “but only if you pay for dinner.”

In an instant flesh turns diamond and lunges around the table with fist clenched hands. Bobby and I watch from our seats at the far end as Namor avoids and evades each throw of diamond fists. Bobby
puts his money on fish face. I put mine on Ems. Scott, elbow deep in paperwork, eventually seems to notice the fight.

Namor ducks to avoid a high kick, and with a fleet-footed spin, he grabs Emma's arm and pulls it behind her back. “Should I consider this foreplay?”

A barely dodged diamond back-kick between the thighs, and Namor growls with excitement. Emma tries an elbow to the stomach, a hit to the jaw, a head butt, and all else, but the fish king keeps his advantage. A broken chair, and far too much adrenaline, the fight threatens white boards and overhead screens. One glance at Scott, however, and Bobby and I are bettin' the same. So much for beer money.

The red beam deflects from the ceiling at a seventy two degree angle, speeding past until it catches the bottom corner frame of the far back window. The beam snaps back, whizzing under Namor's upheld arm and ricochets off Emma's diamond collar bone. As she careens to the ground, the glimmer of red energy finds final purchase in the soft under Namor's chin. Surprised by the sudden blow, fish face stumbles back to catch his balance. Black eyes glare down at the boy king, but Scott, as always, is unmoved.

“Emma, Danger Room. Seven a.m. Next two months.” His only words before he returns to his work. Emma begins to scoff, but stops herself. Whether she's letting sympathy get to her, or knows what seven a.m. in the Danger Room means, I can't tell. Either way, she stalks back to the table and takes her seat.

Head table files in. Business as usual, save for extra squabbles over supplies. Scotty's still tryin' to catch us up after a disastrous day of non-controlled mayhem. Interesting stuff comes later when Summers pulls X-Club up on screen. It starts as a simple conversation over the latest formula changes to the gas – another increase in Fentanyl, an increase in both the magnesium calcite and the aequorin. Twenty minutes in, it erupts into a blue furred volcano ready to detonate with all the ash and lava of a months-long grudge.

“I've tested the formula dozens of times, Scott! It cannot control telepaths! I've got bigger problems to deal with than these ludicrous gas guns!” McCoy rages into the X-Club screen. Blue fur fists pound against an off-screen metal table.

“Test it again,” Scott replies blandly.

A beastly roar, and Hank yanks at the thick blue pelt atop his head. A stutter and stop - for the first time in history, Henry McCoy is speechless. Breathless, he stares into the screen, eyes incensed beyond reason. “Scott, this is ridiculous. The results won't change!! I refuse--”

An audible inhale of epiphany stops Beast's rant. A long finger points absently at the X-Club screen. “Change. That's--” Scott's face suddenly animates with the breakneck speed of thoughts. One brow up, long fingers drawing soft lines in the air, his focus drops to the table in long moments of anxious silence. The whole table watches. “Change. Th-there's a change. I need X-Club here now. Bring your testing equipment. Bring a gun.”

On the precipice of final pieces, Scott gradually points across the table at me. His voice is slow, deliberate, like the final brushstrokes upon a masterwork. “Outside of battle, you can't hear or smell the mechs.” I shake my head. “Can Hepzibah?” Again I shake my head, and a slow, sneaky smile begins to turn the edges of One-eye's mouth as visor dips focus towards table. Slow, meandering words, broken off like bridges in a storm. “She wasn't... A teleport shouldn't... but I could... then... We all could...” It's a sight so inconceivable – this sudden movement upon Scott's face, the stuttered-out half thoughts – that even Namor waits in breathless suspense to hear the conclusion of the tale.
“Emma, I’m going to need a volunteer.”
The red and green blips of monitors and computers - flat lines, wavy lines, dots and dashes. Med pads stretched out on rivers of wires, hooked up to scanning remotes and processors. “We could have done this downstairs,” McCoy snipes, pressing another med pad to Emma's temple.

A cup of water sits on the far end of the table, a radio, a bottle of cinnamon, a small white ball.

An hour after watching Scott's features fade from on-the-verge back to smooth-calm-cool, the show is almost ready to begin. In the hallway, scarfing a hot, fresh, pepperoni pizza – a bribe to collect a second volunteer for the coming experiment – sits Bobby, with a host of psionic-shielding-circuitry taped to his head. Rao and Nemesis scroll down a list of carefully planned questions, pointing out quiet comments and criticism to Cyclops as Beast and Jeffries continue to wire Emma into the machinery. Even though patience wears thin at the edges, head table keeps their collective cool and waits.

Then, finally, gas masks on and lights out. “Truth first, then perception. Start the clock,” Scott issues in the darkness.

Madison Jeffries, with a deep inhale, points the barrel of a gas gun at Emma Frost, and pulls the trigger. The room is flooded with the sickly yellow-tinted fumes. Emma coughs and gasps, wheezes and bangs her chest, and just as her head tips over into unconsciousness, every liquid ounce of blood in her money-well-spent body starts to glow with the luminescence of a too-close moon.

Out in the hall, a faint awe of amazement and mumbled cursing over the thirty second rule not applying to pizza.

Red visor maintains strict focus on Emma, while McCoy and Jeffries scramble across the machines. When read-outs check clear, Box gives the nod and Nemesis – with his whiskey-edged voice – begins. “What is the state of Utopia?”

“What is the state of Utopia?” Emma answers, gas-bitten and emotionless.

“Hectic,” Emma answers, gas-bitten and emotionless.

“A gasp of breath and creased brow, Emma tries to fight the words that pour from her lips. Another dose of gas, and fighting ceases. Words drone out, a trail of worker ants led on by the wrath of the queen. “Food supplies low. Damage from riot. Injury. In-fighting. Distrust.”
A nod from One-Eye and the second truth begs answer. “Describe the weaknesses to Utopian security.”

Utopian secrets parade across the silence of the room. Some we know about – such as our intention to protect mutant civilians at all costs; the vulnerability of patrols on the mainland; the storm-caused static of coms; and Cyclops’ confinement to his sick-bed which left the rest of us scrambling to pick up the pieces. The near-daily possibility of a split between Utopians and Atlanteans which would leave Utopia vulnerable to underwater attack. The prisoners in the Brig. A was-slowly-being-remedied-but-now-behind-consistency of supplies that causes discontent and feelings of mutiny.

Some shock us to incredulity, as Scott has not bothered to share the details of his fears with those who did not immediately need to know. The crumbling, southwestern edge of rock where the asteroid first hit upon re-entry could become the perfect place for a bomb. A small snag in the hastily rebuilt sewer system that could leave the building penetrable from the northeast. A blind spot in security cameras to the southeast – though less than a foot wide – could become an entry point. An untrustworthy boat captain who had more than once tried to deliver an unasked for storage container.

“Bobby,” Cyclops puts halt to the drone of words, having allowed himself and the rest of us to understand that the truth part of the gas does indeed work. Beast’s eyes form large round suns of resentful vehemence, but before the heated temper can burst forth, Scott speaks again. “Perception.”

Her scientific curiosity at peak, Rao takes the cup of water from the table. She shakes Emma’s drowsed frame, and lifts elegant chin. “Look at me.” Blue eyes flutter open in a vacant, hypnotized stare. “This water is room temperature. Make it feel boiling hot to those who touch it.”

Scott stretches out unbroken arm. Palm up, he gives the nod to Rao. Tipping the cup, she pours several drops of water into his waiting hand. As soon as the water hits, Slim flings his hand as if suddenly burned. His face unmoved, he nods towards the rest of head table. Those who wish to volunteer hold out their hands, and each is met with the stunning feel of boiling water.

Nervously, Bobby holds out his own hand. Rao pours several drops into his palm, but his reaction is far different from ours. He stares at the water, then at Rao. Nervous words follow. “It's – it's not hot.”

The second test involves the cinnamon. Double checking that the air is safe to breathe, we remove our masks as Rao gives the order to block the scent of cinnamon. And lo’ and behold, not a one of us can smell it except for Bobbykins and his neural shield.

The radio test is two-fold. After well-worded commands, only Bobby can hear the sweet, sweet stationary sounds of off-island Motown; but as soon as Bobby starts swinging Diana Ross and her Supremes around in the hallway, the sound comes back.

Before we can start lilting the questions, Cyke signals for the fourth test. “Make this white ball appear green.” Mouths drop open once again as Rao reveals the ball to us. Scott holds the ball between somewhat shaken fingers. He rolls it back and forth, lips parting in slow wonderment. A long, intense silence.

“We all see the green ball,” Namor finally speaks, his tone proving that he's more than disturbed by what he's witnessed. “Show us the final -”

“It's green,” Scott confides.

Hearts beat faster as realization settles. Scott sees shades of reds, and only red. Whites blush shades of pink; yellows and oranges are as indistinguishable as blues and purples, greens muddle into shades
of reddish browns. He hasn't seen the purity of color since childhood. “It's the color of grass.”

The final test involves Rao herself. “Camouflage my presence.” And in that instant, Rao disappears from sight, sound, and smell. Cyke's the only one who doesn't gasp, but even he can't hide his anxiety completely. Lips pursed slightly to the right and delicately raised brows, he studies the empty space that Rao used to occupy.

Scott's leader-face returns. “Hide and seek. Logan and Bobby close your eyes.”

I can hear the tap of Rao's heels across the room. The swish of her dress as she moves. The soft clearing of her throat. I can smell the rose water perfume she dots behind her ears. The chemicals on her fingers. The scent of the almonds she had for breakfast. Then, in a flash, it all disappears. “Open your eyes, Logan. Where's Dr. Rao?”

The rest of the room knows where she is hiding, but two quick snaps of Cyke's fingers and all attention is on him, leaving me to wander around the space trying to find Kavita Rao. My stomach flip flops, overwhelmed by the eerie sensation that I have no idea where she's at. Eyes wide, wary, wired with confusion, I look at Summers and shake my head. “Bobby,” he says coolly, “Find Dr. Rao.”

Just as confused as I am, Bobby immediately walks to the back left wall and puts his hand on an unseen shoulder. “Dr. Rao, wave your hand,” Slim commands calmly. In those moments of movement, Kavita Rao appears – full sight, full scent, full sound. But, as soon as she stops, she disappears again.

Barely-visible concern tips one sienna brow towards the frame of visor. “Okay. We're done, Dr. Rao.” Kavita Rao comes back to awareness as she crosses the room. She stops beside the still glowing, still unconscious Emma. A few minutes after, she reappears as if nothing happened. The ball becomes white, the Commodores croon, the scent of cinnamon drifts in the air, and the cup of water is no longer a cauldron of red-hot liquid.

“Lumens depreciation?” Scott blocks the fifteen thousand questions that he knows are coming. “Fifty-five percent,” Jeffries answers. “Viable gas components are showing a similar depreciation pattern.”

“Time?”

Nemesis checks his watch. “Forty five minutes.”

“Truth questions every two minutes until she stops answering. I want to know rate and percentage of gas and lumen depletion down to the second. Everyone else is dismissed.” Cyclops gives no fucks about the turbulence of red-impassioned faces and lack of answers that pool across the room. Right back to his paperwork, all questions, theories and assumptions are dismissed with a cold shoulder and intense concentration.

Mother fucking uptight asshole threw us a party but left the beer at home.
Chapter Summary

Emma tells a joke.

Chapter Notes

Still going strong?

Locked door and think-lights. Emma Frost - arms folded in chagrin over the cold shoulder still sitting at the head of the table – stands, legs crossed at ankles and head tipped towards ceiling beside the War Room door. A shiver of diamond then flesh, a flowing river of hidden depth exposed.

“How’s your head, darlin?” I ask. She gives a slight nod, coats herself with carbon void, and turns her eyes to the floor. “Picked up a bottle o’ cheap white and a case o’ beer on my way back from patrol. We could grab some ramen from -”

“Ramen?” she scorns with a lilt in pale flesh lips. “Please. It’s truffle butter pasta or naught for us tonight, dear friend.”

The scent of truffles and garlic linger in the room long after the completion of the meal. Cheap white finished off an hour ago, replaced by a pricier one she'd stashed below the sink. Half a case o’ beer to go for me, but takin' it slow because five minutes o’ buzz means an hour less conversation.

Emma leans back on the love seat, glass o’ wine swirling in her hand, legs drawn up and heels dug into the cushions. Been five minutes since she said a word, but hey, s’been ten for me. A hack and sip, I lean back into the white wooden chair in the corner and stare up at the ceiling. “You okay?” I finally ask.

Blue eyes tilt left then right, a sigh and a shrug. She ain't, but she's gonna act like it because she thinks that's what's expected of her.

A delicious smile snugs her cheeks. “Sherlock Holmes and Watson are on a camping trip. At some point during the night Watson wakes up Holmes and asks him to look up at the sky and tell him what he sees. Sherlock begins to expound upon the sight before him – the millions of stars that twinkle in the sky. And from there, he begins to extol the knowledge he has gleaned from looking at the stars.”

The red-eyed White Queen takes a sip of wine, her smile growing more elfish with each passing moment. “From this astronomical vision above him, Sherlock deduces that there are millions and billions of galaxies laid out before him. Astrologically, he can see tell that the sun sits in the House of Leo. Horologically, it is just past two o'clock in the morning. His study of meteorology tells him that the weather will be fine and clear the next day. And, theologically, if one believes in such things, that by looking at this wash of brilliance in the sky, he can see how All-powerful and Mighty God is, and how insignificant and meaningless man is.”
A quick pause. Her smile grows more impish. “Sherlock, in his wide-eyed wisdom finally turns to Watson and asks, ‘What about you, Watson? What do you see?’ Watson hits him in the head with a pillow and replies, “You idiot, the sky! Someone has stolen our tent!”

The laughter starts as soft sounds at the bottom our throats, builds into a voiced cascade of giggles, and finally crescendos into all out knee-slapping guffaws that sends a wine-delirious White Queen reeling to the floor in laughter. Her drunken sloppiness only raises the height of laughter into a bedlam of muscle-aching howls and rib-shaking joy. Tears flow, faces hurt, and still the trail o' giggles keep us red faced and smiling. And this is why I like drinkin' with Emma Frost. A clutch o' wit tucked under her arm, an outmatched confidence of self, the woman's got a giggle that would seed the earth with black pepper and peonies. Spicy and sweet, a perfect blend of courage and vulnerability. There ain't another like her in the world. Another time, and it may have been her I'da been chasin' after.

“Oh, Logan,” she muses as she climbs back onto the loveseat, “Thank you.”

“Ain't done nothin' to be thanked for, doll,” I say after a sip of beer. “You're the one that cooked.”

She straightens soft platinum hair and takes another sip of wine. “For this. Thank you for this.” She sweeps her hand through the air. “For letting me be this.”

A shrug of shoulders. “Wouldn't miss out if you begged me.”

“It's hard to find the balance. The right mix of supportive and ex.” Another splash of white in the glass. Emma's gonna have one helluva headache during class tomorrow. “I heard that I revealed some nasty secrets in the meeting today.”

“Wouldn't call 'em nasty. Surprising, but not nasty.” I don't know if she's scroungin' for details, explanation, pity or understanding. Turns out, none of 'em. “He took me off the patrol roster. Apparently, I know too much. The question is, what will he do with the rest of you now that head table knows our vulnerabilities? Not to mention what information Osborne has already gained from Betsy, Noriko, and Monet.”

It's a headspin I hadn't thought about. That I don't think any of us thought about when he dismissed us this morning. “Shit.” She nods in reply. An uncomfortable silence as the world around the mutant race begins to crack yet again.

“Your turn,” she says, chugging down her full glass of wine. “Tell me a joke, Logan. I want to fall asleep with a smile on face.”
Chapter Summary

Logan gets a visitor.

Chapter Notes

A little nervous about this chapter, so I hope it works.

How long's it been since I've heard that knock? Days? Months? Years? I can't remember. His scent has long since faded from the pillows, the feel of his arm wrapped around my neck like something out of a dream. But, I hear it, that soft, tentative knock. Tugging on grey briefs, “Hold on! Be right there!” I check the time. Yep. Three a.m.

Good arm at his side, broken one folded up over his chest, he looks down the hallway, listening to the far away sound of Alison Blair's com. I pull him inside and lock the door.

Two swallows and hand in his hair, Scott Summers looks around my room, nervous, held breath. He tries to speak, fails, turns for the door. I stop him with a gentle hand pressed against his stomach, the one place I know he's not injured. He looks at my hand, runs his fingers back through his hair, and shakes his head. “I-I should – Work. I have work to do. This is...” A gentle removal of my fingers and he steps towards the door again. “I'm sorry,” he whispers, another held breath. “I-I'll go. I'm sorry.”

I block the door. I think that's relief I see on his face. Relief or worry. It's hard to tell the difference. Both inch his brow down; both lessen the length of the lean, long, line of lips; both tilt his head so slightly to the left that you'd have to have a micron stick to measure the difference. Broken arm presses fingers into palms, good arm flat at his side itchin' with he-don't-know-what-to-do. The small hints of emotions play across his face – the rolling jaw, the twitch of right cheek, the remember-how-to-breathe along his stomach. The pallor of skin says he hasn't slept since he pulled himself free of Rao's keep-him-under IV, and the way he's standing – slightly crooked to left knee, good-arm shoulder hitched centimeters up into neck to take the weight off ribs – tells me that he's still in pain. I have no idea where his shoes and socks are, but it makes me think he came here on a whim. “Take a seat,” I say and disappear into the bathroom.

I return with the med kit and a cloth, and he hasn't moved an inch. My tone's purposefully firm. “Scott, sit.” A gentle hand above the cast, and I lead him to the bed. Dip of Adam's apple, slow inhale, and parted lips, he wants to speak but can't. Hand on his shoulder, I guide him down. “Don't fight me, okay?” He doesn't answer – words nor gesture.

I pop the kit and take out the alcohol, slide between his legs, and lower to my knees. His lower lip drags through his teeth, a twist of head to the right. Slowly, to give him time, I undo the top button of his white shirt. Breath grows heavy, the light floral scent of vanilla and musk, tongue darts out to moisten lips, a faint blush of pink along his cheekbones. Third button and a weak attempt to stop me – a light grip on my wrist. Softly, I place my lips upon first knuckle and move his hand to the bed.
Mouth open to draw escaping breath, red lenses focus downwards, upon my face or upon his hand, I can't tell. But when I look at him, when I try to find the warm brown depths behind the red, he loses breath and turns his head.

Buttons down, I carefully tug the sleeves free of shoulders and arms. His breath falters as I draw a tender line over the edges of plaster and cotton. Heartbeat fast, visor forward towards the wall above my head, he swallows hard under parted lips.

I stand then, above him, looking down. He swallows, stares forward, head twisting slightly down towards the bedside table. Slowly, carefully, I place my hand against the side of his head, and push rough fingers against his good shoulder, guide him down, quietly, to the pillows.

On his side he lays, broken arm against the mattress, broken ribs to the air, knees bent, bare feet dusting the floor. The eyes behind red lenses are gone to me. The sound of liquid on cloth. Body shivers as the cool liquid touches down against the warmth of his skin. His breath stalls as I brush the cloth against stitches; long attentive strokes that follow the lines of tender red; cooling, soothing, healing. I listen to his breath calm; watch as tense, wary muscles begin to relax. I watch as the glisten of liquid disappears into the scars dug deep into sun-washed skin, how his chest steadies, his fingers rest on his thigh.

A sharp intake of breath when I place a hand under his still-swollen knee and guide his leg to the bed. He follows with the other one, laying flat now, visor to the ceiling, a soft-edged brow low against metallic frame. Gingerly – watchful of every twitch of jaw, twist of finger, tug of brow – I slip one knee between his legs, the other to his right. Again, a mild dissuasion as my thick fingers grasp the button to his dark grey pants. I take his hand, palm up, and caress moist lips against the soft below his thumb. A deep inhale, his head presses back into pillows. I return his hand to his side, undo the button, and in soft, pacific measures, pull the fabric from his hips and down his endless legs, and drop them to the floor.

A sharp intake of breath when I place a hand under his still-swollen knee and guide his leg to the bed. He follows with the other one, laying flat now, visor to the ceiling, a soft-edged brow low against metallic frame. Gingerly – watchful of every twitch of jaw, twist of finger, tug of brow – I slip one knee between his legs, the other to his right. Again, a mild dissuasion as my thick fingers grasp the button to his dark grey pants. I take his hand, palm up, and caress moist lips against the soft below his thumb. A deep inhale, his head presses back into pillows. I return his hand to his side, undo the button, and in soft, pacific measures, pull the fabric from his hips and down his endless legs, and drop them to the floor.

Another splash of medicinal thought, and a press of cold cloth against his thigh, tracing the cross hatched line from his hip to his knee. Up, down, up, down; light, entrancing brushes, moving close, moving over, touch by touch. Skimming across unstitched, taut muscles, up and over, closer. Closer, until purposeful movements lead to the base of slightly hardening flesh. My fingers graze down, a tickling sweep over his captivating length, urging forth the enticing, salt-heady scent of arousal. His deep inhale and the sudden tensing of muscles from foot to head.

Fuck. I slide myself from the bed, click closed the med kit, and quickly escape to the bathroom.

Shit. I doubt even a shower in the Arctic could slow my fucking perv-mind tonight.

Perched on bathtub edge, I scrub my hands though my hair, wondering what the hell???
Shitfuckdamn. I wanna laugh, I wanna cry, I wanna fucking yell to the fucking heavens. What the fucking hell? Lotsa deep breaths, lotsa just sittin' here trying to remind myself that the guy has half o' chest full of broken ribs, a broken arm, a sprained knee, and a whole headful o' Osborne garbage that's about ready to rain down upon us all in a fury of heckfire and brimstone. This can't be happening. Of all the days for him to show up; of all the days for me to fucking strip him to glory and plunge my thoughts into all the things I want to do to Scott fucking Summers, this isn't the one I
woulda wanted, but I fucking did it anyway. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me.

Finally, after a hundred more deep breaths that nearly leave me hyperventilated; a hundred more reminders that Slim's not in any shape for what I have in mind for him; and a hundred more hand-to-the-head-stupid-loser-moments, I exit the bathroom and return to the reality of a fucking gorgeous as hell, naked Scott Summers asleep on the bed. Visor on the nightstand, revealing the now smooth crease of eyelids, curled up under blanket, his hushed, steady breath actually calms me down. Wriggled over to the far side of the bed, he's left me space for a quick slide under the covers. I switch off the lamp and hope like hell my thoughts stay sane.

“Logan?”

A quick breath of whisper, so quiet that any sound in the world could have drowned it out. There's an ache to it, a want, a fear. I can hear the soft intake of breath, shamed and sad. Against my better judgment, against everything I know I should do, I turn over and face him. “You okay?”

Without the visor, his face is far more vulnerable. That lean long line of lips isn't harsh, it's almost sad. The lock trap tight of jaw isn't granite, it's want. The permanent crease of lowered brow isn't command, it's fear.

Good hand reaches up into the darkness, seeking, searching. It touches first upon my shoulder, shaking fingers, cold, nervous. A skip of air as they glide from shoulder to the edge of my jaw, just below my ear. Fingers so tentative, trembling, a feather down my jaw. Eyes closed, he quivers long, battle-hard fingers across my face, creating a map inside his head. Upwards towards cheekbones; a swift, tender passage around the eyes; velvet touches down the slope of my nose. He pushes his hand behind my head, pulling me closer, and returns to the memory of my face. He starts just underneath my eyes; in the deep, tired crescents; moves inwards to my nose, tracing, again, the slope and feel; downward still, pressing into the bow above my lips. There he holds, gossamer light, as he centers himself to the touch.

Slowly, bad hand curls against my cheek, a trail of awakened nerves as it glides itself between my ear and the pillow. A beckoning grip, he edges me closer, closer to waiting lips. The soft vanilla breath of desire – orchids and jungles, a sweet, exotic, needful flavor – a warm breeze within the growing heat. The first touch of his lips to mine, a fleeting wisp, and then retreat. A quiet breath pillows out, and again the brushstroke of his lips. He traces the outline of tendering skin, from the edge to cupid's bow to edge. Lip to lip, a continued breeze of touch. He retraces the path again and again, memorizing the feel and shape, his breath warm like late spring, his fingers gently combing against my hair. I don't dare move.

A moment of cold as he pulls away, up, finding me again with his plump lower lip. Light pressure against skin, he searches the soft lines until he finds the edge of my bottom lip, and begins to sketch again. Lips still parted, head back, he skims the bottom edge of my mouth, tracing it full, and then back again and again. An escape of exotic floral, as he smooths wavering lines from edge to edge, measuring, hypnotizing, closing in, pulling back, deciding.

Lips parted, he pushes forward, coaxing my lower lip between his in delicate, supple circles. Breathless moments as studies the way my lips move against his, as they blend together, form, mold into one endless moment of heightening heat. A soft retreat, gathered breath, and he presses in again, collapsing across the map he's made, sending stars and moons and the bright tails of comets down my spine. Good fingers push into my hair, twirl and tangle. Lips part further, tongue darts across my upper lip, begging, pleading for entrance. Pushes harder between the jangling nerves, brushing the tips of teeth, wandering, exploring, hoping for the first taste of my desire.

My hand tenses against his face, fingers jagged, tense, curling over the soft of eyes, discovering how
they fold, crease in want, in wait. Back, further back, my hand behind his ear, pushing, pushing, until he finally breaks the kiss in a heave of vanilla lust. I push him from side to back, a hungry groan rising from the pit of my stomach. Warm lips upon his sun-washed neck, then stretch it to the side with all-consuming hands, one over the other, over the other, over the other. Back, back into the pillows, to the side, until his neck lay open, a soft pale expanse begging to be caressed with rough fingers from soft of chin to collar bone. A soft, voiceless moan as I press greedy lips into the delicious pale skin once again. Hand pulls down to broken chest, treading across muscle and scars, as lips devour upwards into the precious spot behind his ear. His hips rise in response, a sucked in breath, held tight eyes. My hand continues to roam, finding the soft pink flesh of nipple.

A gentle graze and his body jolts from the bed in excitement, unfortunately pulling at broken ribs. His head careens into my shoulder, hiding the anguish, stifling the pained moan against my arm.

I pull back. Lift myself from the warmth of his body. Remove my hands. Flee the bed. Watch. The scent of burnt caramel in my retreat. I watch the doubt pour across his face, an unguarded moment of shaking head and hinging mouth. The rim of liquid glass along dark lashes; eyes pulled tight; shallow breath. He doesn't feel my movements – in his sudden haze, he doesn't feel my weight as it presses down on the far side of the bed, just beside him, behind him. He pushes himself from the mattress with good arm and bad, ready to run, to disappear; pushes himself up just enough and I fold my arm underneath him, over good arm, under bad ribs. The shock of held breath. His body reacts to the return of my warmth, that I'm still here. Softened eyes pull up trying to find me through closed lids. I press moistened lips against his, loving, languorous, as I hold him steady with one arm.

Tilted, his head falls back, unable to buck forward, up, to twist, push, pull. He has to rely, to trust, to let me hold him, protect him, keep him safe.

Gnarled thumb strokes the upward stretch of his neck, massaging the fish hook scar, smoothing down into the deft of collar bone. I push into the tensed muscle underneath – from neck to shoulder-then turn downwards; hand splayed, twisting over sensitive nipple. I collapse my fingers in a twisting circle, a slow massage as pinked flesh begins to harden. A warm breath, a pleasing pinch, and a catch of baritone in the bottom of his throat. I lick my lips as flesh begins to harden further down below.

I pull him closer into my chest, folding good shoulder against my cold, hard, bones and trace the edge of thumb down over the shore of bandages. Caught, jagged breaths; the reddening of cheeks and brow; the perfume of jungle sweet. Steady hand under his neck, I pull him into another kiss, wild and fraught, the frayed knot of tongues, and my hand travels further down.

I etch my fingers between the hardened lines of perfect abs. Over and over again, back and forth as I catch him with my mouth once again to inhale the exotic fragrance of vanilla. His good hand trembles up my spine, catching the edge of hair, a mindless twist of frenzied nerves and long fingers.

Further down, tracing the edge of curled dark hair; a long held breath as I linger drawing a large crescent moon between thighs and the growing heat. His breath stutters; shallow moans as I edge closer and closer to his throbbing desire.

The first touch, the first light tickle along the engorged length sends shivers across his suspended body, panted moans, and the absent minded pull of my hair. My languid fingers whorl around his manhood; his breath held in anxious, furrowed wait. The first stroke lurches his face into my arm; parted, moist lips loosely kiss against my bicep to muffle the escaping sound. The second stroke pitches his head the other way, a low resonant melody of want.

I pull him further into me, into my chest, onto my arm. His entire weight rests upon me as I find the rhythm to his need. His face... Oh, his face... the way it changes. The building blush, the upward
sweep of sienna brow, the trembling jaw, the tongue that smooths the tip of teeth. Fucking beautiful.

The soft bucking of hips as the pressure of pleasured nerves begins to build - unable to wrench and writhe as I'm sure they would if they were flat upon the bed. His deep oak tone escapes from his collapsing jaw, a stream of ever increasing enraptured moans; lost to themselves, lost to a world without weight, without the rising flood of survival. A rising chant of indulgent bliss as I continue to escalate nerves and bundles, faster, frantic, friction. Building, rising, claiming.

I can feel it. In his body. It tenses. The muscles, they tense, all at once. Mouth draws open, eyes pull tight down, hips jut forward in miraculous strength. And in a shudder of smooth autumn baritone and torrent of heightened nerves, at last, finally, the caught tone of release. A soundless scream, face wide and open, beautiful, alive, full, perfect. Muscles tense, breath struggles, as the culmination of pleasure overcomes him.

Then euphoria. Head lifts, a gasp of delectation, the smooth wide shock of brow. The wave flutters across his body, a quake against muscles and tendons and skin. A second wave, and his head flings back, a prolonged inhale and agitated hand scurrying across my hair. A third wave, a vanilla exhale, deep head forward, the reminder of how to breathe, how to feel, how to be. The fourth wave, the final, and he relaxes into my arm, against my chest, his breath spilling out in soft, warm gusts.

The weariness, the exhaustion draws him further in to me. Lips press blindly against my chest; hand falls to the bed; his breath calms into an even sleepy pace. I hold him there, in my arms, caress the edges of damp, dark hair until I feel him fade to sleep.
XXXV

Chapter Summary

Mysterious schemes and aftershave.

Chapter Notes

Haven't had any comments yet, but I hope someone's still along for the ride.

He stands in the bathroom doorway, fresh showered, shaved and dressed, looking down at matte black shoes and thin black socks. He holds the bottle of aftershave in his hand, not quite sure what to do with it.

**He's such an awkward man.**

“Just put it on the sink,” I tell him from my perch on the bed. Red lens of visor twitches towards my voice – a decision. Stuff it in his pocket, hide it in the War Room like he has been, and it means he's free and clear. That this was just... just something. Something that happened. Something that he can walk away from. Put it on the sink, and well... It's something that will happen again.

While I'm all fine and dandy with what went down last night, he's... Embarrassed? Nervous? Guilty? Ashamed? Happy? Excited? I can't tell. I can't tell how he is. I just know that he ain't said a word since he woke up to the alarm. No mention of the fresh clothes snuck out of the upstairs closet, no mention of the shoes or the aftershave. Just a quiet meander off to the shower to get himself ready for another day.

I'm good though. I get it. Whatever's chasin' down through his head right now, whatever's he's feeling, I can imagine it. I've known Cyke for beer knows how many years, and last night... Well, I always wondered why the psychic babes lined plum up to Kalamazoo for him, and now I know why. A Cyclops lost to lust is a beautiful sight indeed.

A glint of red, and he exits into the bathroom. Oh hell yeah.

Summers returns a moment later, head down, the roll of jaw trying to carve out a word or two into the silence. He crosses into the bedroom space, visor settling upon the knee-high book shelf, a twitch of long fingers as he tries again to measure out a space of words.

I give him an out. I cross the room, type in my lock sequence. “I'll see you at the meeting,” I say with a wink and half nudge grin. A relieved nod, and he exits into the quiet halls of Utopia.

Two cold showers later, and I'm dressed and ready for breakfast.

The waking buzz of quiet chatter. Oatmeal, three pancakes, or two biscuits and brown gravy. Slice o’ melon, some half-jellied pear crap, or an apple. Tofu strips, two sausage links, or a piece of Canadian ham. Apple juice or grape juice. Coffee or tea. Not the most filling of meals, but hey, hunger don't
complain when fed.

Santo sits at the table across from me, some strange sort of grin on his face that doesn't scare off with a morning growl. He whispers to Noriko and Victor, and all three burst out in giggles. More whispers. Rockslide's dumbass Beavis laugh. Gawks and stares. Crap. I just hope he thinks all those wild moans and groans last night were me and not Cyke. Yeah. This ain't gonna go well. Already got Warpath on my tail, and now my fucking slow burn of a neighbor. Shit.

Then I realize he ain't the only one looking at me funny. Alison. Petey. Kurt. Fucking Toad. Just how thin are the walls around here?

“Heard you had a really good night,” Drake twitters from behind me, a smashed up smile on his face, workin’ hard to stifle an all out bust-a-gut laugh fest. Nearly losing his tray to his barely held humor, he sucks in a deep breath and walks to a far, far seat. By the time he sits, he's pounding the table with his fist and bursting at the seams. Santo and crew join back in. Petey looks down at the table, embarrassed for the both me and him. Kurt and Ali hide their faces. Toad snorts and howls.

Before I can stand up and say my piece about how fucking immature this is – that a man's allowed to enjoy himself from time to time - a telepathic message from the Cuckoos floats through our collective minds, immediately taming the hullabaloo: Head table's cancelled for the day. Supply requests will be taken as normal in the Common Room. Follow duties, patrols, and recons as scheduled.

Cyclops cancelling a meeting is a huge deal. More than huge. The cafeteria plunges into an uneasy silence. Kurt looks at me with great concern. I shake my head and shrug, knowing about as much as he does.

War Room door is locked. A peak through windows, and Cyclops sits plugging away at plans. Screens are off, white boards turned around to hide the maps and info scribbled on them. I knock. He doesn't answer. I leave.

Common room supply requests are timed just between morning and afternoon patrols. The only time I see him all day. Clipboard balanced on cast, standing in the sink alcove, dozens of hands waving and flying in the air trying to get his attention. Red lenses flick up and down as he calls out names and writes down basic needs. A quiet mention to Rogue that she needs to organize another karaoke night. A quick map passed to me about a change in my patrol route- a piece of map that circles near the blown-up block of buildings from a few weeks ago. It ain't an area we've needed to patrol after the destruction, so it makes me wonder what he's up to.

After patrol and a quick bite, I'm called to the War Room. Warren's already there, arms crossed, waiting for Slim to acknowledge him. Screens still off, white boards wiped of any traces of schemes and plots and clues. Worthington waves me in. Cyke locks the door.

“A bomb sweep,” Cyclops continues, a nod that we need to listen because he isn't gonna repeat himself. The titanium edge to jaw drops my stomach to my toes – no questions, no refusals, no complaints. No trace of last night; no warmth, fear, or feelings of any kind. I miss the scent of his aftershave on my pillows already.

With long, steady fingers, he spreads a tourist map of SF proper on the table – a jumble of streets and buildings; stars for notable attractions, red dots for businesses, blue dots for restaurants, blocks of green for residential areas, yellow for beachside. He points to a building ten minutes outside of the SF courthouse – a 24/7 newspaper kiosk that sells reads and cigs, a very public place even at this time of night. “Both of you on coms. Report arrival. I'll feed you locations one by one. First sign of mechs retreat.”
“But if we can't see them or smell them-” Warren starts.

“First sign of mechs, retreat,” Summers repeats, his order firm. “If you find a bomb, I'll send back up. Dismissed.” He locks the door behind us.

Night air's warm and stuffy on the mainland. Too many buildings, too much traffic, too much concrete. Nothin' like the breezy nights on the asteroid that tip a touch towards brisk. Warren and I hunker down on the roof of a still-open Pious Henry's Dogs n' Beer just northwest of downtown. Crowd spills out into the open air garden below us, cigarettes and bratwursts, beer and ale.

Our third location of the night, and the pattern's already distinct. Set down at some joint nearby the suspected bomb, get directions to the site, and start the search. Search complete, head to another set down location. Real calculated, real specific stuff. Seemingly random, but there's some unknown purpose to it. It's enough to set my nerves on edge. “Someone call in a threat?” I ask, thinking maybe boy blue has an inkling to what's going on.

“No idea,” Warren responds half-absently, more focused on mission than conversation. Blue finger presses down on ear piece. “Cyke, you there?”

“Status?” A slight tinge of com static.

“At location.” Warren remains in position, staring down on haunches as the streets below us. I look up to the clear night sky.

“One block north, two east. A bike rental shop in foreclosure. Shops in area should be closed. Report arrival.”

A quick report and heard before Warren and I enter the darkened building. Large, flat, empty. Little remains of the failed business. A few overhead racks, the unassuming block of a register counter. A broken air hose and a few odd replacement parts. It's unassuming, well taken care of – a far cry from the kidnap sites or the derelict block blown to smithereens.

“Update.” Cyke's order pulls over static.

“So far, so good,” Warren whispers. A silent gesture and I'm searching the place for an underground passage, a hidden room, or anything that would signal Osborne's deviance. Kicking at flooring, running fingers along spaces in the tiled floor, the space proves innocent to grand designs. “It's clean, Cyclops. No hidden rooms, no buried doors.”

“Next meet location. Six blocks north, ten east. Beachside Grocery, medium building with plenty of street lights. Should be closed for the night. Report arrival.” Yeah, real specific stuff. The slight squint of Angel's eyes, and I know that Warren sees it too. Location open or closed, a brief on the grounds. Cyke usually leaves us to figure out that stuff on our own.


Pink sky and the just rising sun greet Warren and I as we make our way out of the last bomb location on Cyke's list. Through massive static we report an all clear and receive permission to turn off coms and return to the island. Warren's face hints at something at the edge of his thoughts, but he doesn't voice it. I don't blame him. This mission's been a real spook fest.

A rush of wind as flyboy grabs me by the arms to carry me back to Utopia. It ain't until we finally hit the rush of Pacific waves, that Warren finally attempts to mitigate his doubts. “He knew those places were clean.”
“Yup. Sure did.” The end of the conversation. Whatever this mission was really about – and no matter how it's eatin' through our minds right now – we just have to trust that Cyke had his reasons for it. And speculatin' about what those reasons are? That's another can o' worms in and of itself. Whatever he's cookin' up, I have a feeling that we ain't gonna like it.
XXXVI

Chapter Summary

Rain, paper, scissors for stakes.

Chapter Notes

And the steam train keeps on rollin'....

Karaoke signs hung, the promise of Chinese food, but chatter's mostly about the locked tight doors of the War Room and how no one's seen Cyclops out and about for four days. No head table, no walk through the halls, no cafeteria visits. Bunch 'o' mystery missions that no one's talkin' about – least not with words. Eyes tell a whole 'nother story. The eyes-to-the-floor evasions, quick darts left and right – most of the patrols have been on some sort of no-idea-what-that-was-about adventure the past few days.

Whole damn island's on edge for it. Including me.

Beer and whiskey lined up on the Common Room card table, Kurt smiles bright and presents his offerings. “Patrol went okay?” he asks as I take my seat and pour our first shots of the evening.

“Other than some freak threatenin' to blow up Golden Gate with a can o' Sterno and a watermelon, not much to write home about. You?”

Kurt takes a deep breath, winds his tail around the chair leg, and gulps his shot. A blue-black grimace and a cough. His usual calm tenor notes with uncertainty. “Quiet.” Another shot. Then another. “Xavier came to me today. In the chapel.”

I drown the sudden twist in my stomach with my own double shot. Kurt takes notice of my uneasiness, and pours out another two for each of us. A game of rock, paper, scissors to ease the sudden tension. I win, he drinks. I ask. “What'd Chuck want?”

He tells. “Same as before. To talk to Scott.” Another match. He wins. My turn. “And to you.”

I take my shot and give my truth. “Don't know why he doesn't tell me that himself.”

Kurt wins again. “I think you do.”

Ouch. Long hard stare as I take my shot. It's hard to lie to Kurt. Not just 'cause he's our resident master of The Good Book, but because he knows my tells. The way my jaw sits just off to the left when I'm suspicious; how my stare doesn't blink when I'm hiding the authentics; how I don't swallow my liquor right away when I'm not comfy. Between a thousand card games with Gambit and the privilege of being my best friend, Kurt Wagner knows me pretty much better than anyone. “That wasn't a question, Elf.”

He throws rock. I throw paper. “Why's Chuckle-head going to you-”
“That was Scott in your room those days ago.”

Fuck.

Called out, Kurt refills the shots and pushes them in front of me. A blue-black nod of go-ahead-you-need-them, his yellow eyes remain completely focused as I down them one by one. He pours the next four and pops a beer for himself. Sly dog had this planned from the start. He sits back, tail curling this way and that, and waits for the words to rain. They don't, so he prods further, hoping to get under my skin just enough that I acknowledge the truth.

“I did not ask, but I think Piotr recognized his voice, too.”

Triple shot. “Thanks for the discretion.”

“I will keep it, and I'm sure Piotr will, too,” he says with a trustful nod, “However, this situation between Xavier and Scott--”

“Even if Slim had told me somethin', it wouldn't be right to tell you.” I can tell right away that Kurt doesn't fall for it. He knows I know. He pours me another shot. “It's their business, and if Chuck's blabbin' away to get you to interfere, that ain't right.”

By the way yellow eyes suddenly jump from me to the bottle o' beer in his hand, I can tell that Kurt's heard at least some excuse for the rift. Rock, paper, scissors. I win. Kurt drinks and answers. “He tells me Gabriel, Alex and Rachel. He tells me Danger, Cassandra Nova. Things we already know. But that meeting, it spoke to something more.”

Kurt holds out his fist ready for another go, but hesitates when the door opens. Betsy knows full well what we're up to when she enters. She grabs one of my shots, pats Kurt and me on the back, and leaves without a word. Gotta love ninja chicks. They know how to make an exit and leave you wanting more.

“So,” Kurt says with a wide smile and shoves a shot across the table, “Why has the White Queen not turned you into a potato yet?”
XXXVII

Chapter Summary

A late night visit.

Chapter Notes

Sailing along, sailing along....

As I approach the War Room, the lingering scent of harsh soap and Aqua Velva puts me on edge. Xavier. I don't know if he got the conversation he wanted or not, but he was definitely here. A peek through the wayward slats of closed blinds, and I see that Scott's alone sorting through paperwork. Scribbles notes, types on the computer, more notes, more sifting.

I knock. I wait. I knock again. “Scott, open up, damn it.” I wait again. Still no answer. I catch sight of him through the blinds, head on hand, but no motion towards the door.

How many breaths? Thirty? Forty? A thousand? I wait, peering through the tiny space between the blinds. Slim runs his hand through his hair then returns to work. Fucking pisshead. He ain't gonna answer.

I leave.

I take the long way back to my room. I hear Drake call on com some halls down. A late-night pool game in the Common Room that Remy seems to be winning. A top ten list that includes Magneto and Mr. Sinister. Paige and Tabby giggling over Warren. Jeffries cooin' at-a-girls to the energy grid. Another top ten list that includes Emma Frost and Betsy Braddock. Fever Pitch hoardin’ all the popcorn for himself because he popped it.

Restlessness? Is that what this is? A pit in my stomach, half a knot in my throat. Had he answered the door, then maybe... I think tonight I hate my room. How small it is. How little there is. How many years have I lived? And this... twenty books, an ashtray, and a half bottle o' whiskey, this is what I got to show for it. My life's in my head. This re-run of half-scratched memories, on a loop, over and over again. I know half of ’em ain't real. Those are the ones I ignore. But the real ones. The way Jeannie called my name that day, reeled up in my arms, left lipstick on my neck. I remember that day. And, now? Now I don't know why she did it. What she was after. She tore him to fucking pieces, and then came after me. Was it the healing factor? The adamantium?

Did she love him?

Like I did?

She knew. He didn't. That I loved him, but would never tell him. He thought I wanted his wife, and I thought he hated me for it. Maybe he did. Maybe he still does. Even so, I wonder if was he trying to save me? Her? Himself? All that pain, who was he trying to spare? He loved her. I never doubted
that. He loved her more than he loved anything. Me? Did he love her more than me? Does he even love me? Shit. He doesn't even love himself.

Fuck him. Let him drown on his own. Let him spit water and drag for air. Let the waves kick him back faster than he can swim. I can't do this. There's too much fucking damage, too many things... His parents, his wives, his brother, his son, his daughter... At least I have friends. I've grown enough, changed enough to have friends. Might only have a bookshelf to my name, but I've got Kurt at my back. He'd give me his shirt, shoes, and socks if I asked. I've got Piotr, Bets, Ali. I've got James, Warren, Rogue. I've got a family. But Scott? He's got one hundred and ninety eight lives. And I'm just one o' them.

I won't drown along side him.

I don't know if I'm surprised or not when the knock comes at three a.m. That quiet, nervous peck of a knock. I curse under my breath. Part o' me's relieved, part o' me's pissed as hell at being dragged out of bed this late at night. “Yeah, I'm comin’.”

I find my jeans, scruff my hair, answer the door. He can clean his own damn stitches.

“Scott.”

He says nothing. Stands there. Head down, lookin' at his feet. I want to send him away. Yeah. I want to tell him to go lock himself back in that room, leave me the hell alone, and... No. That's not right. That's not what I want to say. Not at all. I pull him in, lock the door. “Take a seat.”

I exit to the bathroom, grab the med kit.

He doesn't me fight me as I undress him tonight. Take off his shirt, his shoes and socks, his pants, his underwear. He does exactly what I tell him. I clean up stitches, apply ointment to the scabbing skin. Change a few bandages. Red lenses stay focused on the ceiling. Breath doesn't hitch. Body doesn't fight. Just a real quiet, real professional like dressin' of wounds.

Of course, I'm not grabbin' his junk right now, so maybe that has somethin' to do with it.

I put the med kit in the bathroom, come back, and he's standing in the middle of the room again. Hasn't put his clothes back on. A tall, sculpted, awkard, body of muscle; shoulders slumped; glasses looking at the floor. Isn't doused in vanilla or caramel. Isn't anything but aftershave, coffee, and nerves. “Sit,” he tells me, his voice a little raspy.

“Are we gonna talk about things?” I ask, looking up at red lenses. My defiance rolls across his jaw like a ping pong game.

“Sit.”

In a purposeful huff of exasperation, I sit. Side of the bed, feet on floor. I want him to see that I'm tired of his silent ass; not answering the War Room door; not telling me what the fuck's going on with him or anything else. I'm not his dog, runnin' amok through some dumbass house, squirrelin' all up at the door when I hear the car pull in. I'm a man, and I don't like being used.

But, he's not using me, is he. Deep down, I know he ain't. Even far up, I know that's not his intention. Beer knows what's running through his head right now, but it ain't treating me like a dog. The shit he's doing right now – this come and go; hell, even the fact that he fucking showed up again – is probably harder on him than me. Scott Summers can make the hard decisions when it comes to missions; can dig down deep and gritty when it comes to keepin' us alive. But, when it comes to himself - when it comes to letting someone close enough to figure out what lies beneath the strat and
tacs – he's nothing but mulled over thoughts and doubt. Scott knows his worth on the battlefield, but outside of that, he sees himself a failure.

For eons and seconds, he just stands there, still facing the wall, head lowered. Doesn't say a word. He licks his lip, presses them together. A twitch in his fingers before he balls them into a fist. A slight shade of red at the edge of ear and cheekbone. Barefoot scuffs the carpet, one tiny counter-clockwise shift, then stops. A deep breath, gaze lifts towards the edge of the ceiling, and another deep breath.

Then – in a move that never woulda crossed my mind in a billions years – he turns to face me. Full on. His entire self, turned forward, nothing to shield him, nothing to hide behind, save deep red lenses. His entire body, all the scars, all the muscles, all the beauty. It dawns on me that this is why he came tonight. He wants me to look. Amazingly, willingly, shockingly - swallowing every doubt in his head, every fear of vulnerability - he wants me to see him.

Good arm down, head turned slightly to the right, breath light. He turns himself to me and lets my eyes devour him. Even covered in plaster and stitches, fresh bandages, I can't help but feel the burning of my groin as I look at that perfect body. Long, lean, sculpted muscles. The arms, the abs, the legs. The way his hip bones jut out just enough underneath well-worked muscles, two edged lines angling down. The soft sienna hair and it's shadowed scattering over his chest, how it drops off at the waves of his stomach, picks back up below his navel, travels down and creates a warmth around him, this breeze of darkened glow. The long line of his neck, turned to side, a tension that joins to jaw. The jaw clenched, rolling underneath stubbled skin. The height of his nose, the weight of sienna brow. I feel my breath grow heavy. I lock my lips. And, he just stands there. Silent. Deciding.

Three steps and he's above me. Looking down. Red lenses like lasers, intent, burning. Jaw steeled. Lips parted. He stands above me and looks, and then gently lowers himself to the floor. Breath, for me, suddenly becomes harder. Careful of his still swollen knee, he edges in between my thighs. Red lenses look at my chest; he doesn't look up; doesn't seek my eyes. But, I look down. And swallow hard. Damn. Not what I expected tonight. At all.

Good hand touches down on knee, holds. I feel my breath get heavier as he waits there, hand still, as he looks down towards the seem of my jeans. I want to touch him, run my fingers through his hair, lift him up and pull him into a passionate kiss, but I don't. That's not what he wants. He's focused. Driven. Controlled.

He inches further between my legs, running hand up the seam of my jeans. A soft barely there etch of thumb, up the seam of my right leg, up over the creased fabric across my quickly heating groin. His hand centers on the button, tentative then determined– the fading scent of burnt caramel before I even sense it in the air. He pops the button through, and slowly turns down the edge of denim.

I'm there, free and clear, just below the fabric, swelling at his gaze. Burning, hoping. I lick my lips as lenses continue to focus downwards. Keep their sights on what lays just below. A soft touch of warm fingers, and it's everything I can do not to jump off the bed and tackle him in desire. “You'll have to help me,” he says, a slight shake of his casted arm. Ruby glasses look up, a long, soft line upon his face. I look down, nerves beginning to go haywire. I help him. My gnarled fingers grip the top band of jeans and in moments, I have them down my thighs. He bends down, places a soft kiss against the sunless skin of my inner knee, and looks back up at me. Am I smiling? Just staring back? Damn. My head's so fuzzy, I can't tell.

Fingers run the length of mid-thigh to the edge of my jeans. “All the way,” he whispers patiently, the sudden strong scent of vanilla and jungle heat. I obey, heeling my jeans to floor.

He looks at me. A study of thighs and heat, and eyes closed, he removes his glasses. Places them just
under the bed, safely tucked away. He places the cast upon one knee, and his lips upon the other. Oh so slight kisses begin to trail upon my leg, leading from knee to mid-thigh. He draws a soft line with his tongue, measuring where he's at, until lips press down again. Inch forward, the long lazy line of tongue, the pressure of lips. Forward. Tongue. Lips. Agonzing. I wait. Staring down as he savors the taste of skin. Taking longer to measure, more time to press his lips against the flesh of inner thigh. I watch him, entranced, heated, as his head moves in soft slow circles over muscles and skin. I want to touch him, pull him against me, but I don't. Not now. Not when he's so close.

He pushes my leg further to the side, pushing tongue harder against muscles, circling until my hastened breath releases with an unintentional moan. Further, he slides in, and I can feel the tickle of his hair against my aching length. He continues, tasting, swirling, sucking bright pink circles from my muscles. I moan, adjust myself, bring myself closer, hoping he finally, finally takes me inside his mouth.

But, he doesn't. Forward he moves up my thigh, the soft inner part. I push again, soft, urgent, instinctual thrusts that edge the softness of sienna hair. But, he ignores my need, continues his slow, torturous pace of licking and sucking and kissing and mapping until I finally feel his cheek nudge against me. The coarseness of stubble against my groin as he continues to pull the moans from my staggered breath. “Damn it, Scott,” I finally manage between lustful daze and all too tense muscles.

He smiles.

He pushes fingers – long, confident fingers – into the curled patch of black hair surrounding me, and I groan in anxious wait. The warmth of vanilla breath and the ghost wisp of perfect lips. And here he begins again, tracing me with his lips. The feather touch, up, slowly up my manhood sends shiver after shiver down my spine, my legs. I watch him, the beauty of it, as he puts each drop of me into his memory. Up, then down, up, then down, his lips teasing me over and over again. My mind fills with stars and galaxies as he whisps over me; nerves and synapses a stutter of electric pulses and need and want. I feel as if I'm going to burst. The way he moves, the warmth and scent, then finally, achingly, his tongue. That hoped for thing lilts out against my erection, so sudden, so wanted, I lose my elbows and hit the mattress. I thrust, hard, pushing him back. “Please. Scott. Damn it.”

Closed eyes flick up towards my voice, and he smiles once again. That wicked, wonderful, delicious grin.

Deft hand, harder now, presses into thigh, leading him back into the thrall. Lips press over swollen orbs, taking them one by one into his mouth, kissing, licking, until I moan for him again. Then up, the tip of tongue presses against the shaft, and up, swirling again around the sensitive tip. I control the thrust, but not the moan. Still he smiles, wrapping his fingers around me, holding me steady and still. His tongue, red and warm, draws upon me again, a craze inducing line that has me twisting chest and head. Another thrust, and he places a soft kiss along the swollen ridge, swirls his tongue, and then finally, after an infinity of pressured wait, he takes me into his mouth with an electric kiss.

I thrust so hard that I knock him off balance, and he reels back to the floor, stretching ribs and knee and arm. Seconds pass before I realize what I've done. Fuck.

His back arches in pain as he pushes himself back to right, arm stretches out to find me again. As much as I want this...

Silence as I watch him adjust to the pain in his ribs. One hand on my knee, face reddened, features soft. He takes a deep breath and suppresses the shock of shudders. Sadly determined, he inches himself back between my legs, but I stop him with a hand upon his shoulder, keeping him back. In a
worried tone, “Scott.” Closed eyes find my voice, a soft shake of head, trying to pretend, but I hold firm. I keep him back. He shakes his head again as the walls he's built to keep me out begin to quake. “It's okay,” I tell him. His head bows against my knee in a failure that only he feels. Silence.

His voice but a sliver. “I'm sorry.”

The swathe of held back emotion turns his face red. Fingers absently caress lines across my calf as he tries to recover himself, his facade. He lifts himself from my knee and searches the floor for his belongings.

“Scott.”

He shakes his head, the emotion harder to hide without his lenses. Embarrassment, fear, failure. He struggles to find his glasses, his shirt, his pants, his shoes. Pain stitches up his side. He can't remember where they're at. More pain as he wrangles oddly over swollen knee. His face wrenches into a fierce scowl, lips pushed up to bare his teeth. He wants to run. He wants to run so bad.

“Scott, come here.”

Flatly, recovered from a moment of near-burst. “I have work to do.”

“Scott, come here.”

“I have to go, Logan.”

I drop to the floor, wrap my arms around him. And, I'm surprised that he allows it, that he doesn't struggle. His head drops to my shoulder and he lets me hold him for long, tragic minutes. I want him to cry. I want him to talk. I want him to tell me how he feels. But, he doesn't. He holds his breath, pushes bare eyes against my shoulder, pulls good arm around me. His tone soft, broken, he repeats himself, “I'm sorry.”

“Ain't done nothing to be sorry for, hon. Not a thing. Okay? You need time to heal. That's all it is. You just need time for your body to heal.”

He wants to believe me. From the way his fingers spike against my spine, he wants to believe me. Long moments until he finally exhales, then inhales again. Muscles tensed, he tries hard to relax himself, let himself fall into me, but the guards he wears are too ingrained. I kiss his neck, softly. “Let's get some sleep, yeah?” A soft nod, and I help him to the bed.

Blinded, he feels for the edge of the bed, and once he finds it, I carefully help him from the floor and towards the mattress. My hand on his back, I guide him to the far edge of the bed, feel around for his glasses underneath, and place them on the night stand. I set the clock to 8:30, but before I turn off the light, his bad hand grips my wrist in another moment of decision.

I see it on his face – the slight jut of chin, brow drawn low, the trembling of lips. The other reason why he came tonight. To show me the rest. The scars that Jean's madness left upon him. I can feel my heart begin to break.

The scars that Jean's madness left upon him. I can feel my heart begin to break.

“Scott, you don't have to--”

Determined to show me, to let me look - even after his wrenching failure - good hand reaches over, wrapping around my index finger. In shifts and starts, hand shaking, he presses my finger over a slight white scar along his ear. The scar is barely noticeable, years old and faded, going from the top of his ear down into the hard muscle of clenched jaw. His eyes are smooth, his scent charred
caramel. Once the scar is traced, he moves my hand to another faded scar – a small pale moon just beneath the center of his lower lip. Then to the fish hook shaped scar in the soft beneath his chin. Four barely visible rings that run the full circumference of his neck. A jagged line, slightly pink, running the length of collar bone and disappears into straps of his arm cast. A deep breath, and he centers my finger upon his chest, between developed pectorals - a small slice where the soft sienna hair does not dust pale skin - a long, white indentation, still centimeters deep, the evidence of a dagger thrust into his sternum.

Lenseless eyes drawn tight, face red with the steel wall of emotion he holds in check, he leads me through the map of his scars – each one a memory of his struggle to love and withdraw; failure and futility; shame and indignation. Breath struggles as he traces my finger across his arm, over his chest, down his legs. Her carved initials - near invisible letters - on his lower back, just off to the right. A long, pinkish string of crosses next to his spine. The evidence of a stab wound hidden at the edges by the knee brace. The still red circles along the bottom of his foot, a wide stretch of odd skin at his ribs. On and on, each remembrance burying him deeper into my shoulder.

I wish he would cry. I wish he would sob, loudly, angrily, and I could wrap my arms around him and at least try to ease his torment. But, I can't. I don't. He's trusting me not to. Trusting me to let him have his dignity, to simply follow traces of the nightmares that Apocalypse had returned to him. Trusting me not to judge, not to speak, not to say anything but just follow. So, that's what I do. I let him silently guide me through the tortures of the love he held for Jean, his failure, his desperation in never wanting to fail again. And when he's finally done, when he's finally revealed himself, why he's so frightened and nervous, he curls himself upon the pillow and waits for me to turn out the light.

I don't know if I should touch him. If I should pull him close, or let him be and spare what's left of his pride; give him time to restrengthen the wall that's threatening to crumble. I don't know what he wants. I don't know what he needs. The strength this took... To show me... I don't want that to falter. In the end, I lay there, watching as the red pulls back from his face. His breath begins to steady, the burnt edge of caramel fades, and soon, he falls asleep.

Waking up an hour before the alarm goes off – I'm not surprised that he's disappeared. Yesterday's clothes folded in a neat pile beside my bathroom door, the smell of aftershave heavy in the air. I won't see him for days, maybe an odd meeting or two, but not here. Sometime in the night his failures had overtaken him, made him run.

Hand through hair and yawn on lips, I trundle off to the bathroom to get ready for my day. His aftershave's still here, which is a good sign. Maybe.
XXXVIII

Chapter Summary

Osborne's plot hits home for one member of the Utopian enclave.

Chapter Notes

Plot's getting thick. Maybe you'll stick around?

A late night haze on moonlit ocean marred by the flashing of red and blue lights. Yellow police tape bars the entrance of dozens of reporters – camera's flashing, video rolling, phone ringing, mouths moving – into the crime scene. A dozen policemen and medics scurry about the docks in and out of five lined-up shipping containers, their openings facing towards the ocean to avoid the congress of waiting media.

Even from here, I can smell the bloodlust on Namor – iron-tainted and boiling, a rage so deep from within that I swear I can smell his veins. As reporters and press yell continuous strings of questions at him, the bloodlust thickens, becomes so vehement, so forceful that I'm afraid he's gonna turn around at any moment and murder the whole gaggled lot behind the tape. Thankfully, he doesn't.

Black eyes stare intently and that movement around the containers, fingers dug so deep into arms that he draws lines of blood and deep blue bruises. Gone is the arrogance, the overconfidence of a king in his kingdom. All that stands beside me is a red mesh of rage and death. Someone will die, Namor will make sure of it.

An hour ago, Warren and I landed here, called away from another one of Cyclops' mystery missions that we couldn't make heads or tails of. Three hours of setting down on rooftops, answering a series of strange questions, and taking off towards the next. No bomb search, no patrol, just one location to the next, until he suddenly stopped. Twelve minutes later, he told us to report to the docks.

I know he's here, somewhere towards the ocean's edge at the other side of the empty flat of cargo drops. I've heard the detectives call his name some fifty times in the last hour. “Cyclops, please follow us.”; “You need to come with us, Cyclops.”; “What can you tell us about this, Cyclops?” Every once in a while, I get a glimpse of his dark blue kevlar uniform, or see the glint of red visor, but he hasn't spoken yet, and the longer he goes without speaking, the angrier Namor gets.

Then there's the smell. A death smell, mingled with rotten fish and garbage. The scent of mold, mildew, and some sort of acid. Blood, decay. Lucky for me, the ocean breeze keeps washing it away, or I'm pretty sure, standing here as long as I have, that I'd be pretty nauseated by now.

Warren stands beside me, just as wary as I am. Blue eyes flow from left to right and back along the docks, his face pinched down in a scowl. If something grabs his attention – some movement or noise – he'll squint through the darkness and shadows in an attempt to see it more clearly. Other than that, he waits, trying to keep himself as calm as possible.
It's another ten minutes before Cyclops comes 'round the corner of one of the containers. He shields his eyes and face from the flash bang of media cameras and the police try to form an unremarkable barrier to shield him from the intrusion. Bandages and casts are more than visible through the slick dark material of his costume, but he walks as if nothing's wrong. Leader face as cool, calm and collected as ever, he has one last quiet conversation with a lead detective. A call is made on a radio, and the police start hedging the reporters back. That's when he waves us forward.

He meets us at the edge of the containers, his suit stinking heavily of the rot. Paramedics come forward, but with a silent gesture he holds them back. The detective quickly makes the rounds, leading paramedics and their plethora of equipment back into the edge of darkness. A wordless nod, and we follow Cyclops into the first container.

Atlanteans. Three Atlantean corpses buried in a muck of fish guts and ocean garbage, and the remnants of three deactivated bombs. Their faces marred by acid burns, their fingers cut off, their bodies completely mutilated. Now I understand why Namor's ready to rumble, and now I understand why we're here. We're here to keep the King of Atlantis from killing every single land dweller on Earth. And, he knows it, too, which is why when his black eyes roll over to us, I pop my claws and Angel spreads his wings.

Surprisingly, however - though the scent of his bloodlust rivals the stench of this container - he remains as dignified and royal as his station demands. A single hand in the air to calm us, his voice a held back torrent of danger and death, he speaks to Cyclops, “You know for a fact that this was Osborne's doing?”

“The bombs were the same make-up as those we've encountered,” Cyke replies, his voice lacking any hint of emotion – no anger, no rage, no grief, no sorrow. A flat, controlled line of authority.

Namor takes a deep breath and returns his gaze to his dead subjects. “How many?”

“Fifteen in all. Three per container.”

Namor nods. “I will see them all, and their remains will be turned over to me.”

“I've already made that clear to the detectives,” Cyclops reveals. “However, they wish to collect forensic evidence – dust for prints, take pictures. I told them it was your decision, and your decision would be final.”

Namor does not answer. Instead, he exits the container and walks towards the next. We follow, several steps behind, and view the bodies with him. There's honor in this, the king viewing his dead. Regardless of the condition, no matter how horrific the circumstances, these were Namor's subjects, his people. He's honor bound to treat their deaths as if they were cuts upon his own flesh. Under his breath, he whispers their names, the names of their families, their sons and daughters, mothers and fathers. He binds them to memory, and when finished his viewing he lays a hand over his heart and offers a silent prayer to the ocean.

Head bowed, Scott remains motionless until Namor speaks again. “Do you have a plan, boy?” Cyclops nods. “Am I included in this plan?” Another nod. “Very well. The detectives can collect their evidence provided the bodies are harmed no further. I will return in one hour to retrieve the dead whether they are finished or not.” Without another word, Namor disappears into the ocean.

“Wolverine,” Cyclops begins as soon as Namor is out of sight, “stay with the detectives collecting evidence inside the containers. Angel, watch the detectives gathering evidence from the bodies. Any peculiarities, no matter how small, I want to know immediately.” A beckoning of fingers, and a hive of policemen, detectives, and examiners flood the docks.
Detectives brush powder on doorways and handles, set markers down for points of evidence and snap pictures. Treading the small spaces between the containers, I pick up bits of conversations. Most remark upon the smell and horror of what lays inside. A few despise the mutants who have suddenly appeared and refuse to leave. Some reveal candid bits about their lives – children's birthday parties, a funny story about a spouse, weekend obligations with in-laws.

I see Summers and the detectives glide in and out of the containers, sometimes carrying a particular piece of evidence, other times exiting with nothing. He doesn't acknowledge me, doesn't nod or gesture, but that's on purpose. Right now, I'm a spy. Though not invisible, I'm here for one purpose – to make sure the investigation isn't tainted. I'm aware of every movement in and out of the containers, every whisper, every pair of hands that digs through fish guts and garbage.

As the rot is cleaned from the premises by officers, the notable pieces of evidence arrive more steadily. Pieces of wire, a hammer, a boot, an empty bottle of muriatic acid, and an alumina die that he pays special attention to, going so far as to watch the detectives catalogue and picture it into evidence himself. And it's this piece – and the officer staring at it – that finally proves Scott's continued caution right again.

Short, stocky, with a shaved head and dark brown eyes, the officer seems more focused on that die than his actual work. I slide myself back into the shadows, just enough so that I can still watch the prick and not be too obvious about my side-eye. A scuff of my boot against the dock alerts both Cyke and Angel that something's in the works. Warren flashes fingers at his side trying to get a lock on who I'm watching, and Cyclops follows our silent conversation from his place beside the detective.

Warren and Scott return to their duties, and I continue to watch the little rat as he works up enough courage to make his move. Once, twice, three times he passes by the evidence table, each time looking over his shoulder, back and forth, to see if he's being watched. He carries another load of fish out of a container, decently fakes a few dry heaves, and runs over to the medical personnel. Again, he passes by the evidence table, returns to the container, and after a few ins and outs, exits again to clear the odors from his stomach. In other words, he's trying to make this seem normal. Enact a routine long enough, include enough witnesses, and no one will suspect him. Everyone will swear that he was somewhere else when the evidence disappeared. 'Course, he ain't figured out that I'm onto him yet, and I doubt he ever will.

Twelve passes by the table, and a lucky distraction via the return of Namor and the Atlanteans, and the die disappears. I watch as his hands slides the alumina into the folds of his pewked on jacket and return to cleaning out fish. Three bangs to my chest, and Cyclops makes a quick call over com for trackers to meet just outside the docs and for heavy hitters to be put on standby. Out of respect for the dead, Scott pulls the com from his ear, and stays by Namor to prepare the bodies.

Through the darkness, I see the twerp grab his smelly old jacket, make an excuse to a superior officer, and loop off into the darkness. He takes one last look over the silent prayers and cleaning of the dead at the dock, crosses the street, and disappears into the shadows.

As luck would have it, a visiting Domino sees him right away. “Don't attack,” I warn her, “Just stay close. We wanna find out where this joker's headin’.” I send Hepzibah and Gambit over the rooftops, Warpath and Rogue through side streets, and keep Laura with me in a straight path behind the thief.

After a few blocks of zigging and zagging, the little guy slows down, taking his time. He grabs a paper and a candy bar from a kiosk, stops off for falafel, and yaks on his phone for a good twenty minutes before setting off again. He hails a cab, and the chase is on again. Our only flyer being Rogue, the rest of us scatter and wait for her location pops.
“Union Street and Columbus,” she calls into static. A few seconds later, she adds, “Turnin' south.”

Team scrambles down to intersecting streets, each calling clear until Dom catches sight of the cab crossin' the rail lines in the financial district. Union Square, the Tenderloin, and deep inside Hayes Valley. Cab finally stops outside of some apartment building. X and I watch from an alley, the others from the roofs.

Lights off, the smell of cigars when the driver finally opens the door. A key ring beep to lock the door, and without even a hitch of nerves, guy parades himself inside. Gambit slinks after him. But other than that, nothing. Not a damn thing. No passenger, no mech parade, no Porter, no Osborne, and especially not the idiot thief of a cop who somehow managed to get past us.

Nothing sinister inside the cab – just a license and notice that it's privately owned. A few cigarette burns in the back seat, what I figure is a stain left from some drunken asshole who lost his chunks, and a half a cup of coffee. Otherwise, cab's clean.

A hiss o' static in our ears. Cyke's finally able to get back to us. “Report.”

“Lost him,” I say through gritted teeth.

Calmly, “How?”

“Dunno.” I look at Rogue then Dom, both shrug. “Got in a cab and disappeared. Gambit's talkin' to the driver now.”

A long pause. Can't tell if Summers is pissed or busy or what. “Gambit, ask for the driver's fare receipts for tonight.”

We can hear the trace pleas of the addled driver when Remy acknowledges. Com hiss dies for a bit, then picks back up. “He only got t'ree, homme.”

“Last one times before one a.m.?”

Pause. “Yeah, dat's right. Says he had another fare d'ough. Lotta cash for no questions. Won't say no more, says dey'll kill him.”

Through heavy static, “Warpath, Gambit, and Rogue, keep a discreet watch over him tonight. Any sign of mechs, call backup. Everyone else back to Utopia.”
XXXIX

Chapter Summary

Coffee and fish.

Chapter Notes

Hopefully, you were looking forward to another update.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Summers – stinkin' of fish guts and rot from the continued dock debacle– stands outside a dilapidated warehouse about thirty minutes walking distance from the ongoing police escapades. Even this far away, the din of reporters and dock workers whispers through the air, but the noise doesn't phase him, nor does our arrival.

Red visor doesn't turn when Warren and I set down beside him. Silent, he holds up a gesture for patience, his face revealing nothing of the purpose or emotion behind this lunchtime call to action. However, by the way he's standing, I can tell that his wounds are still bothering him. The faint iron scent of blood means that one of those finally healing gashes got reopened sometime over night, and underneath the sleek blue fabric, I can see the tell-tale signs of cracked plaster and peeled bandages.

“You smell like rotten fish, Cyke,” I tell him, hoping to gain a flicker of something across the steel reserve of his face, but he doesn't react, which is bad. Visor stays forward, arm stays at his side. To anyone else, he would look like a bystander or an onlooker, but Warren and I know better. This isn't quite battle-mode, this is be-ready-for-danger-mode. A common mode, and unfortunately, one he wears all too often. But considerin' his life, no one blames him. Cyclops' entire existence has been one long war – from the moment his father's de'Havilland crashed into the mountains to now – so, the look is earned, if not troubling at times.

“Where are you from?”

Red lenses didn't stray from the crowd. Locked tight on the comings and goings of the latest mutant protest, he'd spent a good twenty minutes ignoring my attempts at small talk. “Up north,” he finally admitted. Lenses swerved right to a small, sweaty man with a briefcase. “Two o'clock,” he said quietly into calm. “Briefcase.”

“He just left the lawyer's office across the street,” Kurt explained.

“Piotr, stay with him anyway.”

Guy turned out clean, but that didn't stop Mr.-Type-A-Personality-Times-Infinity and his inability to multi-task. While Kurt and Storm talked away to the north of the crowd, and Petey and Kitty whispered towards the south, I sat in silence watching Summers scan the crowd. Fucker wouldn't speak for nothin'. For an hour, I prodded and poked, mocked, argued, and cursed. He rebuffed every damn question like I was a gnat swarming 'round his face. “How long you lived with
Xavier?”... “How long you and Red been together?”... “Why didn't you trot off to college like the rest of 'em?”... “Can you actually see out of those glasses?”... “How old are you?”... And, finally, at my wit's end, “What the hell, dickwad? Didn't Daddy Warbucks teach you manners?”

“He did,” the bastard answered without a hint of humanity. Red lenses continued to observe the crowd. Not riled, not amused, not even offended, his face stayed still and unemotional. I knew I'd piss him off if I kept pushing, and he'd let me keeping pissin' him off under promise of future revenge. He wouldn't beam or yell at me here. No, the jackass would wait until we were in the Danger Room – well away from crowd o' mutant-hating jerk-offs – and then he'd let loose. Like he did this morning. I swore if Summers really wanted to, he could take off my head with those eyes o' his.

Evening came and the protest finally broke. Lenses flickered through the departing throng, a careful recognition of faces and demeanor. He turned his head towards the arrival of policemen, and a call over com pulled us away from our mission and into a nearby cafe. “My treat,” is all he said as we sat down at a far table. Coffee, sundaes, burgers, fries - a filling meal after a long day of scouting a protest for possible Magneto activity. Famished, we all dug in except for Scotty who sipped at a cup o' joe and kept to himself.

While happy chatter flowed between the rest of us, One-eye stayed as silent as fucking fog. 'Course, in the short time we'd been apart of this team, we'd learned not to expect much else from him other than orders and commands. Red lenses would turn towards our conversation at certain points – when 'Ro mentioned a fondness for houseplants and Petey's hope to see a real life panda one day, personal sorts of details – but other than that, they stayed just off to the right, small barely-there movements fluttering throughout his body.

Then, somewhere in my messed up mash of memories, I realized that I recognized those small twitches and discreet nods. Signs I'd seen on other men – other soldiers – when sittin' too close to enemy territory. Bombed out, shot at, stuck in a trench three feet wide eatin’ dirt for breakfast. That secretive observance, the ready-for-action twists of body and legs. The hand twitch on his thigh when a conversation to our right turned to the mutant protest. Scruff of hair, just next to his frames when a broken glass erupted into an argument. A posture shift towards a heated discussion - just enough that he could lunge forward without knockin’ 'Ro out of her chair. Another repositionin’ when three large men with protest signs entered the cafe and started bitchin' about local police. I found it both amusing and frightening at how good the jerk was at hiding his mark o’ the moment. Amusing because no one ever caught on but me. Frightening because I'd known soldiers twice his age – who'd lived through hell - that weren't even half as wary over possible threats. Made me wonder what in the heck had happened to the kid to make him so damn twitchy and aware.

Askin' him about it did no good, but lucky for me, a few shots of whiskey and a too-young-to-drink Bobby Drake filled the void quite nicely.

“I'm not supposed to be talking about this,” Drake slurred after his fourth shot. A lightweight novice, the alcohol hit him like a bulldozer, and away went his tongue. “I'm not even supposed to know.”

“Then how do you know?” I asked, pushing another refill across the table. A sloppy smile swooned across the boy's face.

“Professor Xavier,” he revealed, downing the shot. “Scotty gets all weird about his childhood, so you gotta keep it secret. He doesn't want people to know, even though it makes him make sense.” A half betrayal on his lips, and another shot of whiskey. The innocence of Drake's face darkens with pity and guilt. “After his parents died, he grew up in some lousy orphanage where they did all these experiments on him. Professor didn't give us all the details, but what he did give was pretty bad.”
Bobby reeled as even more of the sweet, sweet poison saturated his movements. A swerve in his seat, and his head bobbed forward, overcome by the rush of liquor. I quickly filled a glass of water and put it in his hand. “Drink,” I told him. Several gulps, and he apologized for his lack of blood when it came to drinks. “I don’t care so long as you don’t pass out yet. Tell me about the orphanage.”

Drake shrugged and took another large swig to right himself. “Some guy named Milbury. Prof thinks he was a mutant because Slim’s memories were all messed with. After the crash, Cyke lost a whole year of his life, but not because of the brain injury. Someone took his memories. Erased everything.”

More water, a couple of aspirin, and the tale of Scott Summers’ childhood spun on into the night. The suspicion of physical harm during the missing the year - mixed with the burgeoning of injured mutation - had been followed by a maze of torturous psychology cruelty. The adoption of his brother; the deaths of would-be foster parents; the manipulated isolation from both children and staff at the hellhole of a home. Slim survived the experiences only to be thrust into further into danger. Jack Winters – another telepathic madman – not only abused the boy, but also forced him into a life of crime. Then one day, Xavier came to the rescue. “Prof only shared a glimpse of that first memory, but that was enough. No kid should ever be treated like that. Ever.”

He described a child too small for his age, starved and bruised, lost. Torn up inside and outside. A mess of kid whose life had been nothing but tragedy. “In a way,” Bobby admitted, “I’m glad I can’t see his eyes. ’Cause if he still looks like that...” The sad tenor dropped away, fingers juggling small bits of ice to ease the nervousness.

While his sadness trod long and cast his face further into prolific thought, my outrage began to boil. “So, Xavier trains this brutalized kid to be the general of his mutant army?”

Looking down, Bobby shrugged again, the alcohol a little too thick in his brain to stave his tongue. “I guess Cyke was really good at it.”

The smell of sulphur bamf mixed with the fish rot smell clinging to Summers’ awake-all-night-again-behind, makes me damn near pewk. And while Warren gives a little chuckle, Slim doesn’t even appear to notice.

Warren quickly straightens up though when he sees Kurt and Betsy. A grimness settles brow low over blue eyes. “Thought you were keeping the telepaths off-field until this was over?”

Cyclops doesn’t say a thing. Grumpy as hell, we simply follow him into the building trying our best to ignore the stench. Gestures point us towards the four corners of the rubbish filled space, while he stands in the center. Through com static, he says, “Anything look out of sorts?”

Over the chorus of static, we each manage to reply ‘no’, though for Psylocke it takes two or three times before we can hear her. “Heard,” his tone reveals no more than his stuck-in-leader-mode-face. “Head back to Utopia.”

I'm not the only one who's flustered at this thirty second mission, but the sudden tension that flares across his jaw line dares us to argue. So, we don't. Nightcrawler bamfs Betsy away, and Warren and I follow Cyclops out of the warehouse.

I still want to ask him what the hell, but another look at the harsh contemplation that tilts his head slightly up and brings his lips a tad closer to fullness, and I chicken out again. Nothing like getting reamed by an already cantankerous One-eye. “You coming back with us?”

Long moments before he answers. “No.” And, with that, he walks back towards the docks.
Warren and I wait until he's well out of sight before lifting into the air. Once over water, we finally feel free to speak. “What do you think he figured out?” Warren asks over the crush sound of ocean.

“No idea.” My tone betrays my worry.

Wings dip down to avoid a sudden draft of wind – strong and sturdy like the makings of a storm – then back up towards clouds. “He's not breaking,” Warren eases. “He doesn't break over stuff like this.”

Angel’s known Scott since they were kids, but I can't help askin' myself if his familiarity leads to overconfidence in One-eye and his ability to handle the weight of an entire species. “So you say.”

“Trust me,” he says through the bite of ocean torrent, “This is Cyclops at his best. Osborne won't know what hit him until long after Scotty's done with him.”

The statement unsettles the both of us. I can feel Wingboy's fingers twitching under my arms – not a tired-type twitching, but a deep down the world's-goin'-to-hell sort of twitch. Yeah, we both know that Summers is the man with the plan, but there’s only so much pressure a person can take before the brain matter starts crackin' to bits. Bad thing about Cyke, he can hide a fucking breakdown as easy as he can hide a needle at a circus. We won't see it until it's too late.

“He’ll be fine,” Warren repeats as much for me as for himself.

Wasn't 'til night time that I could hear him move around, escape the confines of office or bedroom - pad himself down the hall; unlock the door; and slip himself inside. There were nights I could hear him pace across the room, muttering under his breath. Other nights he’d sit in the old rocking chair by the crib – the creak-creak-creak of its gliders as soft as Jeannie's dreams in a room down the hall. And then others, there'd just be silence. Couldn't tell if he was standing, sitting, sleeping. Not a noise, not a scent, just him and the crib. Nathan's crib. His son's crib.

Jean mentioned that she wanted to donate the crib to a family in need. Nathan was gone and wasn't coming back. Cyke said no. They didn't fight about it, didn't argue. He left the kitchen. She sighed and looked out the window. “I'm not trying to be cruel,” she explained to the rest of us. And, she wasn't. It had been over a month. The crib only served as a reminder of all that he'd abandoned and subsequently lost; of a son he sent into the future to be cured; a son he would never know. Like tiny bits of glass, her pain clung to the edges of darkened eyelashes, and her pale skin turned red with guilt.

But, Jeannie was too good to blame herself for Cyke's mess. That much she’d assured us of weeks ago. Sinister had cloned her, which wasn't her fault. It was Summers who’d married the clone and had a child. Again, not her fault. It was Slim who'd abandoned his wife and child when he found out Jean was still alive. She didn't ask him to do that. She would never have asked him to do that. It was also Sinister who'd faked Maddie and Nathan's death, and Scott who gave up looking for them – not her. Jean didn't turn Maddie into a psycho bitch hell-bent on turning the world to ash, nor did she infect Nathan with the techno-organic virus and send him into the future. Jean was not to blame for any of this.

But, she still felt guilty. She'd loved Nathan like he'd come from her own womb, and not her clone's. And, that thought alone was enough to blanket her to the floor and loose the hot rush of tears she'd held in check. Storm was quick to her side, her gentle hands smoothing back red hair, and whispering, “It's okay. It's all right. Everything will be fine,” over and over again, until Jeannie finally fell silent. Her forehead pressed against the goddess's shoulder and hands in her lap, Red sat quiet for long, long moments.
Kurt offered her a glass of water, Piotr brought her a chair, and I pushed a pillow into her lap. For hours, we sat there, talking Jean through her guilt, through her anguish. We were so immersed at the tales she told – the stories of Cyclops and Phoenix, of Cyclops and the Goblin Queen, of Cyclops and his future-missing son – that we didn't hear Scotty leave.

The crib was shattered into a thousand pieces.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks Severus1snape for teaching me about the italics!
“Scott,” Kurt pleads, gold eyes round and glistening, “he just wants to talk. That's all.”

Two days and nights on the docks; covered head to toe in the stench of guts, slime, and rot; awake for who knows how many days before that; and the pain in his side bad enough to make him wince, Slim's more than just a shade of hot temper. He's a fucking chasm of seething, soul-searing, stink-addled savageness. Teeth bared, fists clenched, and red rage building up behind visor, Kurt ducks low to the ground and 'ports in case One-eye forgets himself and loses what little remains of his facade.

Whether due to the look in Nightcrawler's eyes, or his own self-discipline, Cyclops takes three deep breaths and runs a muck-covered glove over the hood of his costume. Within moments, leader-face is back, and Cyke's in control. Bone weary and aching, his voice is quiet, half-rasped, “Fine. I'll give him ten minutes.” Good hand snagged into cast, he waits.

Lips pursed in confusion, gold eyes leap to me, then to Scott. “You mean now?”

“Nine minutes, thirty seconds.”

With a poof of sulfuric excitement, Elf 'ports away in a cloud of blue-black smoke. Alone – now, for the first time in a week, but not for long – the many words I have for him, the few words he has for me become a long, harsh distance between us. He licks dry lips, mouth opens and shuts. Red lens looks towards, then away, then to the rock beneath his feet. “You still smell, Cyke,” I say in hopes of relieving a bit of tension. Sienna brows crease at first with temper, but smooth into the taint of smile. My heart hurts for it.

The stench of Nightcrawler's teleport pulls his face back to iron sternness. Teeth bite tight, fingers clench a little harder, but brow stays long and unreadable. The intensity of ruby focus towards the sudden figure of Charles Xavier is enough to freeze the blood in my veins. But it ain't Chuckle-head that I'm worried about - at least, not after I see Scott's arm drop and jaw relax. Head lowers, breath evens out. His entire stance changes in less than three second after Chuck sets his blue-eyed gaze on him.

Scotty's getting mind fucked. Again.

“Keep your claws sheathed, Wolverine,” Xavier warns, a firm hand in the air signaling both patience
and threat. Blue eyes grow dark, steady fingers tap the arm of the wheelchair. An arid spite to his tone – the same used by fathers to wayward and disappointing sons - “I intend no harm. As I told Kurt, I only wish to speak with Scott, nothing more.”

In my head, I feel his thoughts. Pillars and foundations, strong marble structures of strength and courage and care. These are not Martha's formless notions, nor Emma's cool, coy breezes of melody. No, this is Xavier, and with his mind he creates the essence of protection and safety, wisdom, calm. He asks me to trust him. Tells me that there's nothing to be afraid of, and to simply walk away.

But, I don't.

Nor does he force me. Unlike Scott, I'm in complete control of myself – able to move, to walk, to speak. Again, Xavier's pleading thoughts eek into my head. His heart bleeds, pangs, wakes him in the middle of the night. The need to protect his first and most ardent student, the anguish over made mistakes, the hope to heal and help, to become the trusted mentor once again. These structures – built of shattered mirrors and oceans of tears – stay my claws and my instinct to protect diminishes under the weight of heartache.

“So Scott,” he says firmly, “This feud between us has gone on long enough. It's time we end it.”

Dark brows lower into visor, long fingers twitch and stretch as Cyclops fights the telepathic nudge to lower himself to the ground. But, it's a fight he can't win. Having been around telepaths most of his life, Cyke has renowned mental defenses, but days without sleep and the buzzing pressure of Osborne swarming his every waking moment have left him weak. Slowly, knees bend, good hand hits ground, and Summers grudgingly falls to his knees.

Power play complete, Xavier maneuvers his steadfast chair to front and stares down at his prodigal-would-be-son. Blue eyes shade dark, angry thoughts, then lighten into a cold, spring morning. “I only wanted to protect you,” he says softly. “That's all I ever wanted.”

Then silence. Long moments as the on-his-knees boy scout cringes and fights against the tendrils of thoughts tinging in his head. Good hand pulls and stretches the fabric of dark blue hood, a show of teeth, and strained snarls as he fights against the intrusion. “Chuck,” I manage after pulling myself free of the heartache entrenched in my head, “Let him go. If he doesn’t want to talk --”

“He needs to listen to reason, Logan,” Xavier says aloud as Scott continues to buckle under the mental pressure. Gentle fingers reach down and press over Slim's jagged hand, coaxing it back from strain. Carefully, Charles untwines the digits from sleek blue fabric, and eases the red flare of fight from his former student's mind. “I'm not your enemy, Scott. You must believe that.”

It's an instinct. To protect what's mine, what I want. To bludgeon and cut, pierce and shred. And as I watch Scott's defenses fall further into the mindless haze, a primal rage breaks through the structures of sentiment left inside my mind. Blood too fast, heart too loud, my muscles catch and strain to hold back the desire to pop my claws and rip Chuck to pieces. But, before I lose control completely, the wrench of ache tames my onslaught of anger. Thoughts and memories, hopes and sleek ivory columns of stalwart faith flood my mind.

Small, scared, silent in the glittering aftermath of a battle. Red lenses cracked, hands curled through shags of hair. A boy, barely 13, mouth agape, tears on his cheeks, a sob of anguish stuck in his throat. The bruises, the burns, the bones poking through half-starved skin. Not an inch of him free of some manner of abuse. He looked at Xavier, then, listened to words of safety and nurturing. “You can trust me, Scott,” Charles soothed, reaching down to the frightened boy. “I will protect you.”

A nightmare screamed into the still night air. Eyes opened to the red flare of uncontrolled fear.
Force beams blasted through wall then roof, a rain of destruction fell onto the bed before the boy could close his eyes. A shallow whimper, dark hair sleek with sweat, he crawled under the covers, pillow over head, shaking, begging for reprieve. Months had passed since coming here, to live under Xavier's care, but the evil he'd witnessed plagued him still. Xavier's gentle hand reached out and touched the boy's shivering shoulder, soothed the fear of dream. “It's okay, Scott. They can't hurt you here. I will protect you.”

Fourteen now? Taller, less fragile. Quiet, red lenses stared out the window, watched as children played across the street. His face flat, blank, a flint edge to child's jaw. “Do you want to play with them?” Xavier asked. The child shook his head, returned to the meal laid out before him. His heart ached for the young boy still chained to the skeletons of his past. So much violence and death. The boy had survived, yes, but the scars, Xavier feared, were permanent. “If you want to play, Scott, it's okay. I'll be right here. I'll protect you.”

Day in, day out he trained. Hunger stunted body flourished, swept up like a tree, tall and athletic, honed muscles and techniques. His mind, starved by lack, soaked up books and knowledge like earth starved for rain. The scared little boy covered in cuts and gashes, bruises and burns had become steel. Hardened, prepared, observant. Stoic. But, there were others to protect now, too. Bobby, Hank, Warren, Jean. Her life had been a charmed one until her powers awoke, and the Phoenix reached out its fiery talons. Xavier felt it claw its way into her thoughts, casting omens and nightmares across her frightened psyche. Jean needed him more than any of them now. She needed his protection, his care, his esteem.

That night, she drew the kitchen knife down Scott's back for the first time. That trickle of blood and scars earned her temporary relief from the hunger of the Phoenix.

Guilt ridden from her delight, Xavier soothed her tears and calmed her racing thoughts. “She said it would help,” Scott whispered from the bed, hiding his doubt. Sixteen, fearless and fearful at the same time, naive and tortured, he watched Jean cry herself to sleep in Charles' slender arms.

“Turn around,” he commanded, motioning for his student to show him the wounds. Long, shallow lines, in the shape of fiery wings streaked red drops of blood down his back. “Does it hurt?” The boy shook his head. Xavier twirled psionic fingers into Jean's mind, the flames of the Phoenix had dimmed now that it had tasted blood. He looked at Scott, then to the girl in his arms. “You're willing to do this for her?” An iron jolt of a nod. “Very well, then, let's protect her.”

“It was your decision, Scott,” Xavier reminds him. Blue eyes scan the kneeling form below him, silent, drowsed from the continued psionic ambush. “I will not be punished for actions you willingly agreed to.”

A frozen diamond cascade, “Agreed to?” From above, a beautiful sight – settling down on Angel's wings – Emma frost runs cold carbon to flesh now that she has won her surprise. Winter eyes and coyly spread lips, she taps her cheek with feigned pensiveness. “There's a reason why the Hellfire Club enforces a strict adults only policy. Sixteen year old children don't necessarily make the best decisions.”

“Scott was no fool. He knew what she was asking,” Xavier breathes, his focus still on the man before him. “He loved her.”

The mercuric wind of Emma's laugh peels away at Chuck's resolve. “And that's why you erased years worth memories?”

Blue meets blue in a whiplash of psionic tension. Summers' body heaves to the right and left as unseen telepathic waves crash against his mind, then falls motionless to the ground when Emma
gains her hold. Metal wings slice the air, and before Xavier can react, Warren hefts an unconscious Scott into the sky and away from the battle. “Go, meet at Logan’s room,” Emma's voice cracks under psychic strain, and a bamf later, I'm back in my room.
He sleeps.

Soundly now - after an hour of the psionic backlash driving his empty stomach to dry heaves and his head to terrible ache – he sleeps. Clean, soft, he rests on pillows and under blankets, snuggled down by Emma's nudge to dream.

What he dreams of, I can't tell. As expert as I've become at watching his face, there are things still hidden, things I can't imagine. And though I knew what his life had been, seeing him in those memories – that small, frightened child hidden away behind red lenses and fright – haunts me. Bobby was right. Hidden eyes has made things easier.

At bedside I sit, a lazy finger tracing the edge of sienna hair. Eyes flutter behind closed lids, racing with the images of rest – back and forth over and over again, in an unpleasant race of symbolism and subconscious. Lips curl down, brow creases, the burgeoning of nightmare from rehashed memories flurries across his sleep. “Shhh,” I soothe, palm against his heart, “I gotcha, hon. I gotcha.” As if he hears me, he tenders my name into the air. Still under spell of telepathic sleep, good arm flings up, out with a desperate grasp of air. Again, my name, and his face sinks into some sort of hellish oblivion.

I slide in beside him, careful, hand measuring the quickened pace of heartbeat. Against his neck – that frantic pulse – I whisper, “I'm right here, Scotty. I'm right here.” A kiss, then watch as horror fades back into something more akin to peace. A deep sigh, and long fingers twine over skin; the chimera of slumber seeking, searching, softening into silence when sleeping hand finds solace within my own.

I wish for days like this, years, lifetimes. His dreams halcyon; and me, the shield around him -a bastion of stone and unafraid - to protect the one who protects the world. I could lay forever like this, my hand on his heart, my lips on his ear. This near-calm floats like clouds, turns his scent to fields of golden barley drifting on late summer winds – fresh, clean, a bounty wild with sweet and promise.

But, he stirs too soon.

The psionic repose drifts off a mere three hours after it had sludged across his mind. His body warms, fills with the small signs of life. Three deep breaths, and a gentle lift of lips, his fingers hook into mine. A moment, a pause. Lenseless, eyes closed, he feels across the cotton clothes upon his frame – the uniform replaced with breezy T-shirt and grey sweatpants. An airy chuckle, “I smell
better.” Another second of silence, his mouth dry with rest and indecision. A lick of lips and exhaled breath, he swallows. “Thank you.” A choice steels his jaw, perks his brow, exhales and presses that lean, long line of lips together. Another deep breath, and trembling fingers lock into mine, thumb stroking the pale skin of my inner wrist.

He turns his head towards me, captures my mouth in cotton kiss, and something in him wakes.

A sudden urgency skitters good hand up against my jaw, carressing and smoothing me forward to meet his want. Fast, unexpected, this compulsion plays across my still-catching-up-thoughts. His touch is warm, light, a ray of sun and shade, relief and heat all at once. I let him roam across my lips, shift his memorized paths into tugs and nips and the pressing down of mouth. His need is observant, loving, filled with adoration and hope. Neither forceful nor lazy, it's firm, vigorous, seeking my indulgence.

As much I should, I don't fight it.

A slick of exploration across my teeth, and I part the gates, surrendering to the war of knots inside my mouth. His tongue, it roams, touching and tasting, twining and escaping. And in his breath, vanilla and musk begin to grow. Teeth graze, grate, pinch down on lower lip, biting, keeping me close and refusing my retreat to pillows and the coolness of air. The growl that rises in my throat makes him smile. He begins his espionage – his subtle attack of slips and slides, fingers feathering behind ears and over hair – once again, teasing and taunting with soft moans and a press of his body into mine.

My instinct, then – the first claws of feral and fierce – grips his hair and pulls him closer, deepening the kiss and the wellspring of his need. Hunger shocks and sparks when a moan from deep within his chest escapes into the back of my throat. Hand to the back of sienna hair, the other gripping at his jaw, thigh tangled over wounded knee, our tongues clash and bend and break through barricades. Hands and mouths find purchase in small, explosive spots that drum forth the small choked murmurs of bass and baritone.

Through our kiss, I can feel his lips tighten in smile when my body tremors in reaction to his careful fingers and moist lips. His ministrations continue after he breaks away – his lips and tongue whorling neck to ear – a light suction against pulse, and a growl inducing chafe of teeth against earlobe. He dusks thumb across the darkened buds on my chest, then scrapes perfect nails across the space between sternum and abs.

Down he treads, holding me to mattress with good arm. A trail of damp and need as he carries himself on top of my chest, braces my hips with knees – his body hovering, heating – as he searches for mines midst sinew and flesh. The places he finds in his march upon me. Where collar bone meets shoulder, down further to the top of ribs. Moistened tastes of aereola, followed by a teasing pinch. The underscore of diaphragm, down to navel, to the ticklish spot on my sides, then back to swelling nipples.

His weight above, his hands, his mouth – they are bliss. Here, now, the weight of my world is that of a gravitational flux that spurs me on into suns and speeding comets – a feeling of air, clouds, and the breeze of touch. His hands and lips span across dampening skin, rescuing deep pants and moans from my chest. He reaches back, grazes his hardened fingers across the crease of jeans. Blood cascades in an instant, pooling into eagerness and scratching at my years and years of held-back want.

In his grip, he massages palm into my need, tugging over denim to electrify and excite. My hips flare under his enticement. Good hand flies to mattress and I quickly catch the rest of his balance. “Scott, you're not -” I try to warn him as I feel the animal rush seep into my veins.
“I want a lover, Logan, not a mother,” he chides, his voice as plain as ever. A moment, a smile, a hand drawn down the center of my chest from neck to navel; a twitch of thing that pleases and flirts. Deviousness draws a smirk to his right cheek, angles the brow over closed eyes. Tongue held behind his teeth, he pushes good hand against my shoulder and begins a smooth undulation of hips against my groin to prove his point. The ebb and flow of pressure that rubs over jeans and length rips a greedy growl from my throat. Closed eyes, parted lips – his face flushes with the sound of my undoing. Chin back, his concentration at peak, he increases the pace, pools the blood and nerves between my thighs, pants and bites his lower lip in effort.

Prone upon the blankets, I could let him ride me for days and nights and months and years. Watch the long, lean line of mouth plush and part with artistry. The tide of muscles as they wax and wane throughout his form. The quiet ballad of siren moans, the long fingers latched to shoulder, the rush and ocean to my groin.

But, the beast within my brain has other ideas.

Overcome by the onslaught of heat, I tackle him to the bed, push him underneath and trap him between arms and legs. Vanilla musk heaves from his chest, a barrage against my waning control. Feeling my pause as I take moments to collect myself, he begins his surge again. The crests and waves of back and abs, crescendoing into hips, grinding against the ache of my erection. He smiles, a coy smirk overlaiden with beck and call. He doesn’t understand what he’s waking inside of me, and that part of me doesn't want him to.

The scent of adamantium scents the air with char and sweet, his fight or flight activated. The flow of hips halts, head tilts with observance. The small muscles of his jaw tighten, and brow creases with wait. “Relax, Slim,” I ease with a steadying hand against his heart. My dangerous smile hidden from his closed eyes, he can only judge by the whisper of my voice. A deep breath sucked in, he swallows, and stops the shivers that escape when cold metal touches down between cotton and flesh.

A careful razor under cloth exposes fresh-scrubbed skin, blushed with warmth and damp with sweat. As still as stone, he abides this predatory undressing. Strips of cotton shred at careful slices, hewing away at the swaths of shield. And, when finally open, finally free of covering, longing rumbles greedy and gluttonous from the pit of my empty stomach.

My hands plane across my prize, spread out like webs detonating tremors across his body. Bones and muscles, healing scars, all I've ever wanted lay out before me like dewed treasure – perfect pale and glistening. A skim across the shores of plaster, down past navel, and under the waist of easy jogging pants. He's easily freed – his long, rigid length already oozing with prolonged desire.

My sudden grip on shaft and a finger teased over leaking head, a lustrous cry spills forth from unheedful lungs. “Whole of Utopia heard that, Scott,” I caution wryly and wait for the recovery of speech. His reply is but a continued symphony of secret temples and wild places. Inhaled, exhaled, whispered and sobbed, he bites his lip in pleased agony as I pulse his length in an unforgiving rhythm. He feeds me, the beast – my eyes, my nose, my ears, my mouth - every sense brimming and overflowing, but I'm still not full.

Leaning in, I suck dry his mouth, loose him of air and wet. A battle of voltaic nerves and lapsing control erupts into the gripping of skin along my shoulder blades then up into hair. Long fingers tug and twine, and pull me back to gain needed oxygen. His face red, smooth, overcome, he gasps and looks at me through closed eyes. The juggling of Adam's apple as he swallows and swallows again, his fingers holding me in stay, his heart racing random against my chest. My Alpha beats across my brain, a snap-to pressure of pure pheremones and dominance. He is mine, will always be mine, and soon, he will understand.
Down again, my fingers first, followed by lips and grates of teeth. My treasure, he shivers for me; pants and moans; plies himself to every touch. A lush dip into navel, sweet butterflies that follow the dust trail of sienna hair, and a langorous lapse of lips across just-jutting hip bones and further down into splendor.

Between his legs, the musky scent of arousal bashes against waning restraint. Heeling up, the beast rises – a hunter, a predator threatening to crack what little remains of control - to peel across this body before me, to impale and suck and mark and own. Every inch, every scar, every stolen breath. The beast wants them all. The inner thighs are a song and jangled dance. The heavy, swollen balls a playground of writhing. The buttocks – those beautiful cheeks hidden from me – holds secrets and layers I've yet to fully explore.

Back to base and throbbing shaft, I swirl the corona to exquisite and shining, listen for the off-kilter tune of lost in lust. I lap the seed of dripping head, savoring the taste of the salt-glisten trickle upon my tongue. His manhood throbs and jolts, pleads for release. A kiss to cap, so fleeting and teasing that his hips rise dangerously from the bed, the wrench to ribs settling him back quickly to mattress.

Were I myself, I would stop and ginger my actions - but the animal – the animal insists a furied pace. A hastened mouth to crown, down frenulum, I suckle his balls into my mouth, savoring for only seconds before the ache and wait are too much to bare. I rip him from the sheets, flip him onto stomach, his knees bent over bedframe. He gasps – in shock of pain as still-broken bones twist and hit in the movement – then grips mattress tightly with good hand. Kneeling down between bent legs and gripping ass cheeks tight, I marvel greedily at the wonders before me. A rough massage, his pale muscular buttocks molded through hard fingers, I feel the pain ease into pleasure.

His breath steadies, and the quiet river of moans pressed into blankets seers through my veins. Suction against pale flesh tips up pinked marks of ownership. Fingers tease the edge of cheeks, opening them wide, then squeezing them tight as I explore the underside of hanging shaft and swollen balls with tongue and lips and withholding grip. He could cum at a touch, if I let him.

A break, a precaution – one hand reaches to bedside drawer – and the procuring of lubrication. Bottle placed beside his thigh, I return to that firm, squared ass.

With covetous grip, I open ass wide and stare at the tight tunnel within. I knead the muscles, a fury of rough kisses as his excitement builds, then tongue – deft and swift and slick – touches down upon the entrance. He shivers and shudders and shakes, not expecting the nerves to cause such bliss. A voiced inhale, another out as my tongue explores the outer evening rose flesh.

His heartbeat races at my touch – part want, part fear – brought on by the sudden awareness of my instinct as I delve and probe and mark his perfect bottom with nails and teeth and tongue. Burnt caramel and vanilla interlaced with tenuous earth and aftershave swifts across the air - an unspoken threat that even the animal pretends to understands. If I hurt him again, he'll disappear. He'll take my treasure, my years of longing, and not return. Though the animal heeds, tames himself, the animal will not care for long.

I push between his thighs, thoughts scraping over his scented portent. I respond with a hand to his spine, sweeping it straight down in long soothing strokes, over and over. Eons lapse before charring fades and his body begins to ease against my touch. Entranced by the lush floral, losing impulse as the verdant balm cascades across the brutality of instinct, I temporarily obey his need for soft and slow, for something less than rabid and too-eager-to-take.

Reddened skin pales, lustful sheen begins to dry, and his body becomes prone to me once more. I stack the pillows under his hips to lessen the weight of near-future-drive, pillow the blanket under his head, take extra care to polish him, ready him. Every touch a drop of rain, each kiss a ripple of
autumn warmth. The predator and his paragon, for now, a smooth midnight rippling of morning glow.

On knees - with orchids and musk still wreaking havok on my primal mind – my obesiciance to grace and gossamer gratifies him. A leisurly tongue to tip and edge, his manhood rises to life again – long and curved to pleasing arc – it juts against the bedframe, giving me plenty of access to the sensitive nerves underneath. When raptured melody kilters into tuneless pants and heaves, I return to the needful window hidden between firm cheeks.

He accepts the gentle fingers that spread him apart with both trepidation and relief. Tongue swipes over the tightened hole, clenching at the still unfamiliar intrusion. “Ssshhh,” a gust of air against the damp, another easy slash of tongue and kiss. The careful building of flowing muscles, of trust, before I pressure the taut passage again. He pulls the sheets against his mouth as I begin to poke and prod the entrance loose; tongue extending just inside the still reactive rim. Wet and moist, my tongue glides easily around the darkened hole, sweeping in and out, along the ridged skin, titillating and cajoling. I feel the heat of his groin grow firmer, and the soft spatter of precum upon my knee. Hips rolling gently, he relaxes himself, riding the wave of protrusion with sparse, indulgent air. “Logan,” he pants, holding back a flash of heavenly curses.

A quick pause, the warming of clear, thick fluid between my fingers, and I press down upon the hole, massaging my way past the squeeze of passage. His breath held, head buried deep in blankets, his tight passage swoons and bows at my provocation. Tip first, I spread him open to shock and love all at once. He flexes like hunger against my finger, holding me inside, and then begins to sip – the slow yield of muscles opening and closing, then finally filtering into readiness. Further I go, and again, he seeks to quench himself, to sate and let go.

Another slick of lube upon finger. A hook and push – patience – as he adjusts, then further in to final knuckle. He takes me easier this time, accepts the stretch of nerves with a deep inhale, and so begins the pump and search for that most rapturous spot, and when I find it... Oh, when I find it... The fast ocean of baritone and quaking muscles, the flow of vanilla and the deeper scents of lush green and morning rain, the rocking of hips and the loss self as I brush across his prostrate time and again. A second finger and a continued chorus of breaking walls, I guide him into welcoming me.

Sun-washed flesh blushed with the deepening red of delectation, his voice rasped with continued cries, and his body open and ready, I take my stance. A grip on hip - my member firm and hard and drizzling with ache. I position the head of erection against his hole – rubbing, enticing and teasing - waiting for him to beg. And, beg, he does – his hips a torrent of waves, bitten lip, impatient brow. Good hand wrenches tight, ready, waiting, willing. He bites into the tense flesh his bicep, muffling sound, exhilarated far beyond his stoic resolve. His hair bejeweled with specks of heat, his face clenched down, his body prepared for pleasuring pain.

With a laugh, I obey, spearing his tightness with as much mindfulness as the animal can muster. He crashes against the incursion, pushes forward into pillows as I breach and wait for him to swallow me whole. “Relax, Scott,” I manage to say before the cherished pressure completely overtakes me. I push in slowly, give him time to sup and feast and fill, to relax and open up for me. The warmth of him dazzling, it takes all my will not to overpower his wafting control with an immediate, pounding rhythm. In, further, further – delighting as he twists against me, nudges himself upon my staff, strains and releases with exerted groans - I push to hilt and withdraw. Ease my way inside again, this time a palapable thrill as I glaze his prostrate.

An April rhythm – jabbed down, my balance at his hips - smooth and slack, showering across the agitated gland. He holds to me when I roll back, opens when I invade – a matching rhythm of tightness and warmth, ease and flow. His careful observance of low down growls and caught breaths
– he learns quickly how to please me – and finds some measure of rapture in return. His cock flushes against the bed, an even tempo of brushed on stroke as I ride his hips. Hands twitch, toes curl, his face chimes beautifully close to release. He calls my name, a bell tone of bliss, and then, something inside me snaps.

Synapses spark through spine, scurrying over shoulders, scouring over skin. Everything amplifies, boils, damps, speeds, frenzies. His passage – his window, his rocking and squeezing and calling out for me – is a dangerous torrent and I begin to drown. The animal now reeks in ecstasy as I pump inside his tight, wet heat. A craze, a madness, a fury and storm, my beastly barricade cracks.

Against my wont, I lose myself to urgency, slam into his passage as hard and deep as I can. Again and again, I drive full force into firm, reddened ass. The slap of metal-coated hips against skin sends a maelstrom through my veins. Harder, faster, the animal cries out with a fierce howl. Down against his broken body, arms wrapped tight around ribs, ignoring the squirming man beneath me, the sweat that drips, the melody that halts and clutches against sharp inhales.

And, I lose him, too.

Somewhere within my building fury as rock-hard erection overdrives and overfills; as the weight and strength of adamantium skeleton crashes in and against him; as the predator overtakes, he disappears from me. His head muffled into pooled blankets, his hand rips at mattress edge and the rest of his body goes limp. Pleasure or pain, it doesn't matter. He's mine to do as I wish. I'm the Alpha. That's all that matters.

I impale him again and again, over and over, a storm-lashed tidal wave flooding over sunwashed beaches. I feel it, inside of me, the swell of intensity. Vision blurs, breath breaks, and final harsh stabs pull the tsunami from my groin. It fills him, fulfills me, spurs me into cosmos and erupting stars, my oblivion spilled within his loins, marking him forever as mine. In smaller, tired thrusts, I empty myself inside of him, collapse all weight across his spine, and float away on the tide of euphoria.

Curling up along his back, nuzzling the tickling edges of sienna hair, I reach for hand still clawed into torn mattress seam. And, slowly, I realize what I've done. His body unmoving beneath me, his breath soft and quiet, face hidden in blankets. I push away from him almost immediately, watch in horror as my fingerprints appear on hips and ass. Light purple marks and crescents of nails. And the scent of fear, charred deep and thick. “Shit. Scott?” I grab his visor off the night stand, place it into good hand. His breath soft, controlled – whispered puffs of in and out – he remains as still as glaciers. “Scott?”

“I'm sorry.” Yet, he's the one that apologizes.

Once again, I'm afraid to touch him. Afraid that he'll break, that he'll crack and fall asunder. Minutes pass before he moves again, and with another apology on his lips, he shields his face from me and exits to the bathroom.
Chapter Summary

Blondes and bombshells.

Chapter Notes

Another chapter closer to the end...

I hear the blast from the Common Room, then feel the uneasy shakes of destruction. We all do. All 198. Flashes of Osborne, Magneto, fucking SHIELD play across our minds as we race out onto morning asteroid. Emma meets me at the end of the living quarters, her face all decked out in high-budget horror and shock. She looks to me for answers, but I don't have any more than she does. As flyers leap to the air, and porters clear the halls, the rest of us fleet-foot it to the south of the building, ready for a counter strike. Claws out, teeth done fierce, I'm ready to rip someone apart for invading my home.

Of course, what I find when I arrive, is wholly unexpected. Heart stops, breath evacuates, and my head buzzes with alarm and doom.

First time I've seen Summers in three days, and he looks like hell. No sleep, no eats, no aftershave. The dust of his current threat-turned-action - a thick gray silt shined with broken metallic shards layered across growing beard and sleepy hair; caked across his face, filling the lines along his brow and mouth – makes him look almost crazed. He ain't himself, all polished and put together, the boy scout, the leader.

Hand readied on visor, battle-mode gripping jaw like a bear trap, Cyclops' stands half-way between the blown out walls of the War Room and the ocean's edge. White shirt near ripped in half, a big blue welt on high cheek bone, and both casts busted, he takes no notice of the gathering crowd, nor their oohs and aahs and oh shits. We wait silently for a gesture of intervention.

Six feet away, rising up from scuffed knees, Namor clucks his anger through gritted teeth. Dark eyes tinged to tiny crescents and bloodied palm against the massive bruise across his chest, his anger flares his face into deep, rigid angles. Blood drips from wounds along his back where he crashed through War Room walls, his lip bloodied from hitting the ground face first, and his face a boiling cauldron of hate. Doling out a wealth of Atlantean curses and cracking his neck to left, then right, a viscous, vicious grin slicks across his face. “You'll pay for that, boy.”

Cyke – his usual rather-stay-prepared-than-bait-your-stupid-ass silence in tow – strikes a beam of crimson warning not five inches from Gillface's feet. Surprised, the fish king dances back to avoid the ruckus of debris kicked up by force beam, and jigs again when a second hits just off to the right. Having been the recipient of Summers' little ruby waltz more times than I can count, I know how infuriating those damn force beams can be. He's a bitch of a dance partner.

A step forward earns Namor a smack to the shoulder; red glare responds to left leaning lunge with a
ray to the knee; and a twist twirls to ground when the slap of Slim's stare knocks against his feet. Namor volleys with a second wind, but Cyclops – his couldn't-care-less-facade not bothered in the least – can play this game all day if he chooses. Fishface ain't got the patience to wear him down.

“Blood for blood, little king,” he spits and lashes into another tirade of oceanic hexes. “My people died because of your negligence. Feel fortunate that your son is gone, and your brother and daughter already dead, or I would serve them at a feast tonight in your very honor.” A sickening caveat, and Namor means every word of it.

Though I wish he would, Scott doesn't hide behind his tough-skinned teammates or mighty brawlers. No, the dumbass stands front and center acting like he's got more balls than a bounce house and motions for us to stand down and let him handle this. Faced with an arrogant idiot and his threat of Imperius Rex hovering in the air, the stubborn fuck attempts yet another round of reason instead of blasting Namor to the depths of the Red Sea. “Osborne killed your people, Namor. Not me.”

“Not only did you keep the ship captain a secret, but you failed to investigate the containers. How many of my people have been lost because you sent the containers back?” Not caged – merely wary of the brewing crowd and possible side swipes – the stupid prick paces three steps to the right before squaring off against Cyclops again. “A fit king takes caution, child, yet you did not.”

“I'm not a king, Namor, nor a child.” The feint of relaxation, but Namor's seen this shift in tactics before – this calm-the-fuck-down leaning back of shoulders and loosening of jaw – so, he's not fooled. He knows what Cyke's doing. Summers may not have universe-ending powers, but he's fast with his beams and faster with his thoughts. The slightest misstep, and Namor'll be suckin' clams from his teeth for the next decade. “If you wish to air grievances, I will call Head Table. If the Table wishes to remove my leadership for my inaction on the captain, then so be it. I will accept whatever action they wish to impose.”

A dark laugh, “You mistake me, boy. I do not want to remove you from power, I want to remove your head.” With speed that defies vision, the King of Atlantis howls his battle cry into the air, swifting forward in an instant to take Cyclops off his pedestal. Slim doesn't flinch. An eyebeam to off-balance ankles, and the sea king skids to the ground. The dance begins again, a jagged line of red and dust, pushing Namor back to the edge of ocean. Shamed and enraged by the constant ploy, Fishbait rubs sharp chin and smiles. “I have grown tired of your little trick, Summers. It's time we end this.”

Calm as ever, visor lens retains focus on the red faced king who threads his anger through another empiric roar. A lunge and lurch, forcebeams miss the adrenaline-pumped speed that lifts Namor from the ground and across the broken rock. Three beams strike the ground in quick succession, but the fish ain't feared for nothing. Renowned for his prowess - if not his arrogance- he dodges each, closing the distance between them in less than a heartbeat. Though a fourth beam hits its mark against shoulder, Namor's so volcanic with rage that the strike barely registers. A deft swipe at cracked plaster pulls hand from visor and into a quick elbow block of broken ribs.

A barrage of barely dodged strikes to stomach and chin, and Slim's nearly down. The rubble at his feet costs him a precious counterattack in order to keep himself from hitting the ground. But, the game of strat and tacs continues regardless of how it looks right now. Cyke takes punches to kidney and jaw – rolls back on broken bones and upturned space rock – gnashes tensed fingers into Namor's arm, kicks foot into diaphragm, and the fish king goes flying as far as Summers can throw him. Which ain't far. Whole, and Scotty may have landed His Majesty a few feet away, but busted up, he only gains inches – a small reprieve that Fishface closes quickly.

It's only after pinning One-eye to the ground that the ocean king realizes his mistake.
Good hand slams inside Fishface’s ready-to-taunt mouth. Hedging wide and tight behind pearly whites, Slim locks both bite and growl and prevents escape. Mouth full of fist and fingers, wide black eyes stare down into red lenses. “You have three choices,” Cyclops says smoothly, twitching the bad hand hemmed on visor in warning. “Fight, discuss, or walk away.”

Namor full well understands the threat. Doesn’t matter how fast or strong he is, one touch of that button, and His Majesty loses his head. Silence, and the slow culling of tension. The sea king lifts his hands in temporary forfeit earning the release of his jaw. He rises from his perch on Slim’s chest, looks across the powering-up crowd, then back to One-eye whose hand still rests on visor. His voice a dangerous sneer, “Every wound given to the dead, I will inflict upon you. Every loss my people feel, you will feel, too. Make no mistake, boy king, I will take your life.”

Still on the ground, visor up, Summers refuses to react to the intended intimidation. “Again, Namor, Osborne hurt your people. If we work together --”

“I grow weary of your words, infant,” he burns in reply, but keeps his hands folded across his chest. He reiterates Cyke's arrogance at keeping the ship captain secret, his foolishness at ignoring the threat of those containers to the Utopian kingdom, and his lack of power when dealing with his woman. Slim’s attempts at preventing casualties have proved nothing more than a castle of sand, swept from shore by mighty waves, and any who continue to follow his so-called leadership are idiots. “Atlantis no longer stands with Utopia,” he scorns. “I would watch your back, if I were you.” With a dark laugh turning angled features into delight, he turns on heel and dives to the depths of the ocean.

“Let him go,” Cyclops commands before the lot of us strike to the water ourselves. Refusing help, Summers struggles himself off the ground. He turns to Emma, “You should be in Hong Kong by now, as per orders.”

A snuff of glittering diamond towards morning sun, then astonished annoyance. “You truly are a work of art, Scott. How many enemies do you intend to make today?”

“I don't intend to make any,” his bland tone ekes into continued, astonished silence. A cold hard stare of diamond into fathomless red lens. “If you feel my leadership is subpar, Emma, then you're free to follow Namor.”

Cyke's been known to say some stupid shit when he's throwing a tantrum, but this is by far one of the most inane things that we've ever heard. Mouths agape, and eyes round in nervous shock, the 198 watch as Emma's face flickers in and out of diamond – from hot red to cool clear and back. Brows tinge across bright blue eyes, lips pinch into offended scowl, so surprised by the sudden bitterness that the White Queen is rendered temporarily speechless. A long stare down, followed by turn on heel, and Summers heads back towards the busted up War Room.

Spurred by the finality of cold shoulder, a string of slurs and curses rockets through the silence. Jagged finger in the air, Ems calls him an ass, a prick, a rotter, a dickhead, and counts the 200 reasons why she's glad they're no longer sharing a bed. He's a selfish, arrogant, heartless pisswad that wouldn't understand the concept of love and sacrifice if it bit him on the arse.

He pauses. Not looking back – as straight and immobile as stone – he listens to her contempt. She's played his guardian angel for far too long. If he wishes to dine in hell so badly, then she will no longer stop his miserable, solitary feast. He's worthless. A disease that rots away at anyone who's ever tried to care for him. A monster damaged beyond repair. A cruel manipulator who's lost sight of the humanity around him, and he's driven her – and everyone who's ever loved him - to sheer madness. “Madelyne, Jean, Nathan, Rachel, Alex – they all deserved someone better than you.”

The twenty minute tirade finally ceases, the ice queen worn out. Summers lingers in the silence for
long moments. A turn of visor over shoulder. Sadness loosens the grip of granite jaw, and he suddenly appears more tired than before. A quiet, throtted tone, “Piotr, get a team together and fix the wall.”

“He’s not your slave, Scott. At least say ‘please’, you ego maniacal asshole,” Emma attempts another round of argument, but Scott’s done for the day. His pace steady, his posture never changing, he steps across the rubble and disappears into the War Room. The rush of the 198 follow him – save for Emma and myself – each hoisting complaints and aggravations to his back. They cite neglect and mutiny, and he will ignore them no longer. Water and power, food supplies and daily chores, missions, patrols, in-fighting and everything else flies at him from all directions, leaving Ems alone with her woes.

Blue eyes follow the ocean current, drifting across tattered thoughts and holding back another gate of tears. “You okay, darlin’?” I ask, leaning a hand on her shoulder. The frenzy of the crowd behind me fades from my focus.

She shrugs, shakes her head, and sighs. A laugh – slow and cynical at first, but grows into a perfect tear-cast melody of ironic chimes and joyous melodies – bubbles up between perfect lips. “That felt good,” she says at last, her whole face tilted towards her smile. “Damn good.”

“I’d say it did,” I agree out of sympathy more than love of the event. Sure, Scotty needs a few pegs knocked out from under him, but her worded swords hit a little too adeptly. She knows it, too, but is steeling herself against the impact. “Hong Kong, eh?”

Chin to air, she hides her hurt behind a show of smug. “High tech handouts, or so he says. He thinks the companies will clamor to me in hopes of gaining an investment from Frost International.” I sense the pause, the something-more behind her explanation. Blue eyes to sky then back to me. “But, in reality, he’s just trying to push me away.”

“He’s good at that,” I admit. I’m sure she senses my guilt. My shame. I’m sure she’s been peeping in on Scotty since his conjugal visit with me. Looked at the whole damn memory, spun it ‘round and ‘round trying to think of some angle to approach him, some way to get him to talk, undo the damage.

Her voice a wisp of morning, blue eyes hunker down somewhere between seriousness and sadness, a tilt to ground then directly into mine. Her lips bleed long, arms cross over chest. “If he’s too much for you, Logan, then walk away while I still have the chance to pick up the pieces. The mutant race needs him. I won’t let him fall apart because of you.”

“I’ve tried to talk to him, Ems --”

“Tried? Is that what you call pining outside the War Room door? Three little knocks and your done? I thought you were the mighty Wolverine, but right now, you’re little more than a pup, mewing at the moon.” Her laugh hits me like a knife to my heart, and now she pours the acid. A diamond cast flickers over flesh. “You lost control, Logan.” She marks my surprise with a graceful diamond glare. “Please. You’ve been projecting for days, dear. My Cuckoos can barely contain themselves over your thoughts.”

A pause and click of tongue against diamond teeth. “Do you think he’s an idiot? That he thought you would be nothing but honey and roses?”

The way she asks – so, blunt and blatant; with a roll of eyes and a sigh, so far beneath her silver-spoon-upbringing - confuses me. I search her face for some clue as to how I should answer. Yes, he’s an idiot for thinking he could control the animal; for turning his back to me; for pushing her away. On the battlefield, though, he can outmaneuver the best of them. He’s observant, careful, and keeps
his cool when it matters most. An idiot? “Yeah, pretty much.”

Laughter – from the stomach, hearty, and filled with disgust – bellows out from suddenly flesh form. She balances her hands on knees; lips, mouths and eyes lilted so perfectly with repugnance that I can't help but take a step back. “Indeed.” A pause. Blue eyes level to loathing glare, then a careful wording, “I give you fair warning, then, my friend. This farce will end when I return from Hong Kong, one way or another. You either choose to love him, or let him go. And, if you let him go, I will never, ever give you the chance to love him again.”
XLIII

Chapter Summary

Daggers and beer.

Chapter Notes

Another chapter. Hope you like it.

Silence. Long after faded temper, long after my patrol, I stand in the corner of the still busted War Room, watching as he deals with the last of 198 complaints. A line of three – Toad, a cafeteria cook, and the mother of a dead mutant boy – tap out their impatience in off-rhythm cadence, but Scott remains a bastion of not-caring. At least to them. Me, however, I can see the weight of his world. Especially as Toad unrolls the list of his demands. A foot long and rambling, the stupid fuck complains about everything from his mop bucket wheels to the use of fluorescent lighting.

Two hours later – two hours before that all-goes-to-hell-in-Utopia time – the woman finally gets her turn. “A memorial,” she says quietly, “for my son, for all the children on that bus.”

For long moments, Scott remains quiet. His breath forcibly steadied, his hand still gripping ball point pen. Red lenses stay forward, but by the slight arch of brow, I can tell his eyes are looking up. He swallows, a deep inhale to filter out emotion and exhale to regain his voice, but still his jaw trembles. A swathe of small, near-imperceptible movements shiver across his body. Tiny flinches of pain just below his glasses, sorrow bending down on the corner of lips, anger curling at his fingers. “Room is precious,” he begins to her shock, “especially now that we're on the verge of reviving the mutant race.”

Her face bends in anger, and a dark rage opens her mouth. “They died because of you, Mr. Summers. You put them on that bus. You sent them away. You promised to keep them safe, but--”

“But,” he steps in before her words overwhelm him. His voice chokes under too many knots, wavers at vowels and hits too hard on consonants. “You're right. They should be honored. We'll find the room. If you have suggestions, then, please write them down.”

He doesn't issue an apology, offer up a sorry-for-your-loss or any other type of grief. He merely waits for her anger to fade and the soft nod that acts as her reply. She turns away, turns back, ready to speak again, but he diverts his attention to the paperwork on the table leaving her with no further words. Guilt, anger, a sudden burst of rotting hatred, then deep, deep sadness. The first of tears rim her eyes. She watches as he scribbles slanted letters across order forms, filling out questions and checking boxes. He knows she's there, but he ignores her. She doesn't know why, and because of that, her grief, the memory of her son – suddenly bereft of his mutant heritage thanks to Scarlet magic and insanity – overpowers what manners remain. “Is my daughter safe here?” she rasps, her eyes large and wide with animosity and worry. “Or will you fail to protect her, too?”

Heartbeat pounding, but otherwise, as cold and stern as ever, Scott continues to fill out the
paperwork. At least, that's what she sees – an unaffected asshole who couldn't give two shits about her son or the memorial – but, it's all an act. A constant stream of swallows, the slowness of his writing, sienna brow tenses over eyes. “Mutants have never been safe, Mrs. Halstrom, but we will protect everyone we can.”

Her face wrapped in pain, the mother stares in horror at the man who proclaims leadership of this mutant nation. She wants humanity, grief, something that speaks to the all-too-early-death of her son, but instead, she gets simple, dull, glacial honesty. Defeated, seething, she shakes her head. “Ms. Frost was right about you,” she hisses. She waits for reaction, for something that wells inside of him. She gets nothing other than pen to paper and too-busy-for-her-humanity.

Scott finally looks up when he hears her footsteps near the broken wall. In the distance, just in the corner between his expanded sight and the corner of his morning destruction, he sees her collapse to the ground. Hands over face, she bawls and sobs and howls for her dead son, the future of her daughter, and a life cursed by the mutant gene. I watch in silence as he makes his decision – to comfort her, to fill her with marshmallow and unicorn platitudes, or to remain where is, finish his work to bring order to his mutant society. I can't say I'm surprised when red lenses tip back down towards paperwork.

“You're an ass, Summers,” I seethe into the silence. He doesn't respond.

I exit into the midnight air, bring the crying woman to my chest. She latches against my shoulder, wets my heart with tears. She settles some minutes later, issues a few quiet apologies for her rudeness. She knows that the X-men are trying to protect them. In her heart, she knows this, but it doesn't stop her from seeking blame. Her son was a child – barely 13 – and she misses him. Worse, her only daughter now dreams of the mob that chased her down with torches and knives, trapped her in an alley. “It was you who saved her,” she tells me. “You saved my daughter. Why couldn't he save my son?”

Hard questions never get sufficient answers.

A bit of talk, soothing, hope, and the desperate mother stands up on shaky legs. Tired, angry, pained, she pats my shoulder and attempts to smile. “You have a good heart,” she eases, “Thank you.” She disappears into night's cloak of darkness.

Scott takes my return the same he does most things, with the barest flicker of acknowledgment. No relief, no thank you, nothing other than grit and steel. In his hand, he holds a letter from the United Nations. He tenders the corner, prints finger over the seal, then pushes it across the table to me.

I refuse it, push it back towards him. “She ain't trash, Cyke.”

“No,” he agrees quietly, and pushes the page back towards me, “she isn't.”

If heartache had a scent – like fight or flight, fear, or lust - I wonder what it would smell like? Maybe salt tinged ozone, or mid winter when the land is lost to frozen scapes. A solitary tree struck by lightning, the burning of wood and singeing of sap. An ocean spray against eroding rock. Or maybe, it does have a scent – the faint wind of pine; or the depth of good earth gone unused, weeping for someone to till and seed it for bounty, to harvest something good from within – and I've become so accustomed to its presence that I can no longer separate it from the person. As I look at him, I see nothing more than what I've always seen – steeled jaw and stoic face, red lenses that hide, and level breath – but I know it's there. The heartache behind the mask.

To Cyclops, leadership means distance, a walling off of heart to keep his mind sound, to keep his decisions accurate and mission focused. In silence, and to his solitude, he takes the hatred that we
offer without complaint, without derision. He buries it in the deep caverns of his mind, covers it with stones and ice, locks it away and hopes it doesn't swallow him. That tends to be his sole excuse for his behavior. In truth, though, he's also avoiding another dagger to the chest.

“Showing a bit of sympathy would make things a lot easier for you and everyone else around here,” I advise. “Might make you easier to put up with.”

He flinches at my admonishment. Red lenses turn away, his face lit with all manner of unsaid words. “I didn't treat her like trash, Logan. I would never --”

“You did worse than that. You treated her like she was nothing.”

My admonishment hits him like a boulder, throwing head to good hand, a heavy heave of breath. “That wasn't my intention.” He pushes the paper again, desperately wanting out of this conversation, or any conversation that he knows I'm after.

So, I don't let up. “You've said that a lot today.” He doesn't even attempt rebuttal. Leaning back in his chair, he prepares himself for the rest of my anger with the same resolve he uses on everyone else. Cracked plaster flakes across his still-wrinkled clothing as he settles hands onto the armrests; back straight, his sole attention upon me, he waits for me to continue. Though I stand less than three feet away, the distance between us, right now, feels like galaxies.

“Scott -” The mere mention of his name pulls his throat into rapid fire swallows, presses lips tight and brows low in order to maintain some semblance of control. He bites down hard on the sound of my voice, does his best to keep breath steady. “You keep this shit up, and people're gonna start walking. Don't matter if you'll give your life to protect them if you don't recognize that they're a life to begin with.”

With a shaken facade of fraudelent courage, “I didn't mean to-”

My laugh cuts him even further. “You meant exactly that. You have been for a while now, bub. You've turned us into numbers. Not that you ever treated us like friends, but at least we used to be people.” My heart hurts to watch him right now. He struggles to keep it down, my words, his actions. Tries like mad to repress every single piece of doubt and fear, shame and guilt, sadness and anger that wells up behind his chest like a geyser about to burst. He absently rubs thumb against chin, lips parted, glasses turned as far away from me as he can. I just shoved a sword through his heart, and now I'm watching him bleed.

I imagine him with eyes closed, tumbling his rampant thoughts through his mind, half dazed with the hurt I just inflicted. But, I don't want him to hurt. I want him to heal. For years I've watched him put the mission before himself, before others, and the pain he holds back just grows. “I want to be a better man, Scott. Like you.”

The admission slowly seeps into his tattered self, crooking up brow and and hinging jaw. Disbelief and fear turn red lenses back to me. He doesn't see himself as good, honorable, upright. And when others do, especially now, it puts more pressure on him to uphold that image. An image that's already so high in expectations – an errorless mastermind, the man with the plan, the rock we've built ourselves around and upon – that he can't maintain it. Fight or flight and voice hoarse, he chokes his words through his instinct to disappear, to bury, to avoid. “You are a good man, Logan.”

“Not like you are.” I close the distance with slow, easy steps. A hand to the bruise on his cheek and his heart skips beats as he attempts to stem the flow of emotions running through him. Fear, want, anger, doubt, hurt. He shies away from the hand that tries to touch him, unsure of my motivation, worried by my words. “I'll never be as good as you. No matter how I change, I will always be the
animal.” I want him to see the difference between us – his good, my evil – and how his current path will lead him to dark, lonely places.

Pressure builds. The confession that I hope saves him, only hurts him more. Cracks in steel, he shakes his head. “You're not an animal.”

Closer now, my body skimming arm and broken plaster, “I am.” I lean in, down, breath against his hair, “I wish, for just one day, they would look at me like they do you. Your words have meaning, Scott. I wish that mine did.”

“They do, Logan.” I kiss the top of his head and he melts to his shoulder. “People listen to you. They always have.” I cup his chin and turn him back to me, thumb daring to stroke the tired crescents under dangerous eyes, down to lips. The first essence of vanilla drifts through the air.

“You don’t.”

“I do.”

My hand caresses neck, massaging it back against chair. Up, a smooth, warm palm against cheek. I hold him there, his face pressed into my hand. “I'm sorry I hurt you, Scott.”

The sudden vanishing of lust and his complete withdrawal from me, he jerks away from my hand, cracking casts even further. His head shaking, his voice a series of starts and stutters, red lenses capture my gaze. “Y-you didn't.”

Surprised, concerned at the reaction, I take a moment to study him. Worry, fear of being a burden, and secrets pull his brow high and his lips small and soft. In my head I see the bruises I inflicted, how I crushed myself against him, into him, treated him like a lesser thing. “Yes. I did.”

His heart pumps with dread, cheeks flinch. Again, he shakes his head. “It-it wasn't you,” he finally speaks. Slowly, he shields himself off from the crash of emotions. Jaw firms, heart slows, his scent becomes a void, sucked in and down, suppressed and cautious.

Unnerved by the change, I take a seat, watching as he continues to guard against the waves that tremor through him. Careful of hands that could reach out to him, he presses back into his chair. “Scott, I lost control -”

Tone firmed, more confident, yet quiet and sincere, “I swear, Logan, what you did... I knew there was a chance that you'd....I would have... stopped you... It-it wasn't you. I promise.”

“Then what the hell happened?” Anger seeps into my veins at his hesitation. “You've treated me like shit for three days, Scott. You wouldn't talk to me, look at me.” And that anger lowers head and trembles his jaw. My ache, my days of guilt, my pain, they wash over him, decimating barely-held guards. Days waiting outside the War Room door, head on knees, waiting for him to answer and talk to me. Nights of punishing myself for losing what little stability I'd earned over the years. My realization that I was and am a horrible man – a killer, a predator – who would hurt the one person who thought I could be better; who trusted me to be better. I compared myself to Madelyn, to Jean, to the violent asshole in Xavier's shared memories; that I could do that to him. If it was all a feint, an act, someway to take revenge for some unknown offense that I'd caused him, then what hell was I doing here? “I deserve an explanation, don't you think? If it wasn't me, then what the fuck happened?”

His face hollows, shoulders slump, a defeated shrug and shake of head. Lips move for words, but he
doesn't speak. Lenses towards floor and to the right, he falls silent. There is no anger, no defense. Called out, lambasted for his glacial distance, there is nothing left but the finality of honesty. He can't hide, can't run, not unless he wishes to destroy what's here, beside him, waiting impatiently for an answer. Before I can unleash another torrent of anger, his voice finally cracks into the silence. Mollified, horrified, his baritone husks reply, “I-I – don't know.”

From anyone else, this would be a lie, an excuse to rid themselves of me and my anger. But from Scott, it's a confession of his ghost of a past. Without anger, judgment, or pity, “You think something else got erased?”

A pause, then trying-to-be-casual shrug. “I don't know.” Without proof, his logic refuses to accept what his heart tells him, that there is yet more to his past than what Apocalypse revealed to him those years ago. Things taken, destroyed, kept hidden; things that effect and cause anguish, keep him solitary and afraid. Prevent him from overcoming and healing. But, he's done with that for now. He shoves the paper back towards me and nods for me to read it.

Reluctantly – preferring to talk this out, but knowing that the stubborn ass'll hold his tongue – I read the UN memo. It demands a laying down armaments, calling his ploy to keep us safe a rogue state and a threat to Global Security. Failure to relinquish our weapons of mass destruction will result in a unified attack upon Utopia and the systematic destruction of any munitions that survive. “Weapons, eh? I take it they're referring to our DNA?”

“It's a forgery,” he explains. “A very, very good one, going so far as to duplicate the same ink and paper stock that the UN uses.” Cyke's knowledge of details doesn't surprise me, but I still don't know what he's asking of me. “The seal,” he continues. “The UN uses an emboss, but that seal is debossed.”

For someone to go through all the trouble of exacting ink and paper, messing up the seal seems ridiculous. “It's a trap?” He nods. “Osborne?”

“Maybe.” A hand to chin signals unvoiced thoughts. “He has government connections, but thus far his revenge has been personal and unaffiliated with HAMMER.”

“Could be a new twist?”

Baritone darkens. “Or a new enemy.”

Music blared, drinks flowed. Ororo danced, Sean tickled the keys, and Kurt entertained. A party at Xavier's that brought an end to another dangerous mission. We laughed and sang, enjoyed this impromptu meeting of circumstance and family. For the first time in memory, I felt at home, snug as a bug, and overwhelmed by a feeling of belonging.

Jean sat on piano's edge, crooning out a melody of love on an enchanted night. The noise we made slowly dimmed, each of us – one by one – entranced by her siren song. Hushed and wandering, a single drop of rain in too-hot sunshine, she sang the tale of a love-lorn woman seeking the arms of her beau. Legs crossed, red hair ablaze over emerald dress, she smiled inside her words, holding notes with intensity, and spinning us further into her dream. She wanted more than just a shoulder, an ear. She wanted the protection of strong arms, the rock-steady stasis of chest, the devouring warmth of heartbeat. She wanted to own, to possess, to mold him to her shape, her form. Jean was in love, but that love turned cold too often.

Slim never left the office. Paperwork, mission details, reconnaissance. He'd excused himself to his silence long before the first fit of laughter and relaxation echoed through the cavernous mansion. We expected nothing more, nothing less.
Save Jean.

Though she knew the man better than any of us – understood that the mutant-hating world would always take precedence – she still pined for him. As she lulled her perfect notes into the air, flung red hair back behind her shoulder, her green eyes scoured across walls and roof, hoping that Scott would finally answer her call.

Down the stairs, through the myriad of hallways, I came to the office door. Ajar, I could see him, hand in hair, staring at pages of mission reports and supply forms. Agitation set his jaw on edge, though I couldn't tell if he was pissed over the music or the work. Oddly, he remained unaware of me, until I blocked the light from the hall. A professional glance, then back to pages. “If you're here to argue, I'm not in the mood.”

If I'd said I hated him, it wouldn't have been an understatement. All asshole and attitude, I could've sliced the prick from toe to his fucking visor and not think twice. But, I didn't. For whatever reason, I let it go. “Jeannie's been serenading you for an hour, Eyeball. You should join her 'fore she finds somewhere else to keep herself warm.”

He took the jab without a flinch, kept his eyes on his work. A printout whirred to life on the nearby fax machine. Messages ripped from the teeth, he glared, then swung himself to a nearby map and began marking coordinates. A trail of multi-shaped pins dotted the west coast to the heart of Portland. Scribbled notes in black ink, and tiny circles drawn to pinpoint possible locations. News articles of mutilated bodies and mutant deaths printed and pasted to the side, numbered and detailed in Cyke's tiny handwriting.

Guilt - real, deep down, mucked up, torn to shambles guilt – stunned me. First time I'd ever really felt it. While he was tracking down some mutant-killing group in Oregon, I was hitting on his girlfriend.

A few minutes later, after realizing I was still in the doorway, he turned to me, his voice as acidic as bleach. “Jean has a beautiful voice, doesn't she?”

“You should come upstairs and enjoy yourself a bit,” I said, hoping he heard the white flag.

His reply came fast and annoyed. “I have work to do.”

“Red --”

“Jean,” he corrected, his distaste for my familiarity with his girlfriend obvious, “understands.”

“Understands what?” I bit back, “That protecting the mutant race is more important than the love of your life?”

I expected anger, sarcasm, a beam to the mouth, but I didn't get those. I get something nearly vulnerable instead. “The love of my life is part of the mutant race.” He shrugs, feigning indifference. “Two birds, one stone.”

I wanted to tell him to take a break, to run upstairs, grab his girl and twirl the floor. I also wanted to bend him over my knee and make him call me daddy. But, I didn't do either. “You should take a break, kid. Experience life outside of the mission. Jean'd be grateful for some company.”

His life was a shield and sword and scrambled haven. He pointed to his map. “I'll take a break when they do.” He understood the futility of his promise. And, I understood that a life outside of war scared him more than death.
“You need to get your casts fixed,” I chide warmly, plucking a finger across the broken shores of plaster.

He nods, sighs. “I've got an appointment with Rao in the morning.”

“That means you have time to grab a beer with me.” He opens his mouth to argue his need for work. “Scotty, it's nearly two in the morning. Ain't nothin' you can do right now that can't wait until tomorrow.” Another refusal hedges on chapped lips. “You ain't slept, shaved, or eaten in three days. You break down, bub, and you take the rest of us with you.”

An hour later, three a.m., under the influence of alcohol and hopefully good company, I hear him laugh for the first time in a long time. A tale of Jubilee and her mall affliction that carried us through the streets of Sidney to Brisbane looking for the latest sneaker trend. Foodcourt hijinks that included a free-range kangaroo and a fireworks show, an attempt to make me ‘all that and a bag of chip’ with a ‘dope’ new shirt and ripped up jeans, and a motorcycle chase that ended on a goat farm somewhere outside Queensland.

He listens intently as he sips his third beer, the alcohol warming his face into soft pinks and toothy smiles. His laugh echoes against metallic walls, booms at times and snickers at others. He's beautiful like this, relaxed, soft. Though his mind still processes the battles ahead, clicks through a thousand scenarios, he's still present in the moment, hinging on my words.

In the silence of after-stories, he wraps his fingers into mine. An inhale, a pause, a quake and coldness of hand. His voice torn and ragged. “I don't know how to fix it anymore.” His face blank, I can still sense as he splinters. The sudden overwhelming aroma of burnt caramel, the deep down musk of fear, his heart racing, the small shift of jaw. At first, I hope he's speaking of himself, finally admitting to his need, to his desperation and solitude. That he wants to change, heal, find respite. And, maybe that's what he did mean, at first, but that confession, that secret would be too much for him to take. He solidifies himself, his tone naturalizing, his heart settling. But even his change in meaning proves his trust. “We're fighting a losing battle. Getting hit from too many sides. I don't know how much longer I can keep us afloat.”

Stark, startling, his words mean more than I'd like to admit. That it's me he speaks to – not Emma, not Chuck, but me – carries so much hope that I want to fly. My advice is simple. “Then ask for help.” I don't know jack when it comes to settin' up a society. I'd rather pluck my eyes out than piddle with paperwork. But, I'm the best there is at what I do, even if what I do ain't pretty.

Of course, being the boy scout that he is, my predilection towards violence doesn't sit sit well with Cyclops. “I'd rather find another way,” he sighs.

“So would I,” I say. “But, if I'm you're only option, if it means keeping these folks safe, then you make the call. Understand?”
Chapter Summary

Taming beasts.

Chapter Notes

Hopefully, this journey is still worth it.

Morning gossip over thinned out oatmeal and watered down orange-drink-concentrate-crap, “Dr. McCoy is leaving.” Not sure who started the shit, but I heard it travel from one side of the room to the other, catching on like fucking chicken pox, with everyone scratchin’ at the bit to add their own piece of ‘news’. Everything from Cyke catching the big blue brain with Ems to One-eye threatening to put him on patrol due to insubordination crossed from lip to lip, table to table. Someone swore they saw a midnight duel for leadership, which Beast subsequently lost, and Slim, offended and pissed, decided to banish McCoy to the depths of the mutant hating world. Another said that they witnessed Slim abusing poor ol’ Hank, hurling everything from vile insults to rotten potatoes at the man, giving Henry no choice but to leave. “It took him three days to get the smell out of his fur,”Toad continues, and launching into yet another tale of Cyclops’ temper and the sweet Beast. “Cried for hours, I tell ya. Never seen the good doctor so upset.”

So, it ain’t no surprise when Proudstar pulls up across from me and sets his tray on the table. Dark eyes in squints, chewin' on a piece of shoe-leather bacon, he looks over his shoulder then back at me. “McCoy really is threatening to leave,” he says quietly.

I shrug. “Has been for months now.” Though I like Henry, this whiny-ass, woe-is-me shit he’s been feeding off of for the past few months has finally gotten under my skin. One thing to point out Cyke’s assholery as of late, but another to blame him for the evil mind of his Apocalyptic counterpart, an evil mind that he's worked with on occasion to solve the Wanda's-no-more-mutants-fuck-up that she still ain't bothered to fix.

“Yeah,” James agrees, having heard McCoy's sobs and snifflies himself, “but this morning, he actually packed his bags.” A Med Bay showdown between Cyclops and his one-time-best-friend that included everything from the furball's torture in the Omega Machine to Summers using people like toilet paper in order to keep the shit from staining his own hands. McCoy got One-eye riled up good, enough that he threatened a beam or two, but Hank – as brilliant with words as science – pulled out a sneak of win. “He said he hoped that Xavier would finally put Scott out of his misery, shut his mind down for good.”

An unpleasant shiver wriggles down my spine. “Damn.” The thought of Scotty getting mind fucked again fills me with dread.

“Summers talked him into staying, but...” He picks at his glop of eggs, mashing them with ketchup and rehydrated broccoli spears. “Look, personally, I think Cyclops is a social vacuum. I don't know what you see in him. Then again, I've never really looked too hard to find out. But, I don't need to be...
his friend to respect him and what he does. He needs to stop overlooking this shit. Emma, Henry, Ororo, Xavier, Namor? They're only poisoning the well.”

“Scott's not a tyrant,” I remind him. “He stops people from voicing their opinion, then that's what he becomes.”

He shrugs. “Sure, but acting like it's okay to speak to him like that, well, it makes him look weak. Nathan wouldn't have put up with it.”

“Nathan'd also have us knee deep in a blood-bath by now.” Of course, I would too. Screw the prep and months of planning, forget about living like super heroes and upright citizens. If it were up to me – at least that part of me – I'd have ripped Osborne's face off months ago and mounted it on my bedroom wall. One-eye's son and I are cut from too similar a cloth. Dismember first, ask questions later. I wonder if Scotty sees the irony in that; that both his son and his would-be-lover have higher body counts than half the world's villains combined.

“So will Osborne if Cyclops doesn't watch our backs.”

It's a sad truth. He knows, I know it. Hell, half the mutants on this fucking island – especially Cyclops, himself – knows it. “He's watching,” I answer, but even to me, my words sound hollow.

And then it hits me. Those walls I want him to take down? That talking I want him to do? Decisions like this – about life, death; the fear of losing this never ending battle between mutants and sapiens – are a big reason why he can't. It ain't just about his fucked to the moon childhood. Not just about Jeannie, or Madelyne, Sinister or Chuck. It's also about his options. That last night I put death on the table, waved it like a carrot on a stick. And bein' the kind of man he is, desperate and overwhelmed – no matter how much he hates the thought – he's going to consider it, and the consideration alone is going to stab him right through the heart.

His secrets, his lies, his granite and cold – he needs those things if he's gonna keep us alive. Without them, then he's just another messed-in-the-head asshole with too much baggage and fucking force beams coming out of his eyes. Broken, damaged, worthless.

Scotty'll never be able to save himself so long as he's trying to save the mutant race.

I take the long way back to my room, listen to the buzz of idle chatter. So many heads filled with nonsense, with things other than decisions and death. Santoros sleeps in heaven after seeing Tabitha in her bathing suit. Megan twitters over karaoke night. Santos sleeps in heaven after seeing Tabitha in her bathing suit. A question about the son of a demon running the chapel. Another about boats to the city. Petey asking Avalanche to help with the War Room reconstruction. Drake complaining about night patrol. All these words in the air, yet not a one gives me peace.

I consider having a talk with ol' Hank myself, lettin' him know where I stand on his whole you-let-me-be-tortured schtick. If I recall things with clarity, I can count more than a dozen times when the fur ball let the rest of muddle through the pain while he sat on his haunches doing jack-shit for anyone. His Avengers card has always been more important than his genetic signature. And, as brilliant as he is, he's always left the hard stuff – the dagger to the chest stuff – to everyone else. Be it Storm, Scott, or Moira McTaggart, Beast has always preferred to play the bouncing blue behemoth rather than take responsibility for things himself.

I also gallivant around the idea of giving Chuckle-head a piece of my mind. Let him know that if he ever tries to fuck with Scott's head again, that I'll fuck with his instead. But, I don't do that either. Pretty sure Summers would have a fit if I interfered, and I don't need to make things worse. Not for me, not for him.
Down the maze of metal corridors, drowning in thoughts until I open my door. The scent of aftershave nearly drops me to my knees.

He grabs me, swoops me against his chest, and holds me as if I'm the only thing left in the world. Something precious, worthy, honored. Bathed in pine and vanilla, deep rich earth, and smoked caramel, I feel a weight lift from me, relief. My nerves shake with the shock of unburdening, but he holds me up, presses a tender kiss to the top of my head, and whispers my name.

Why he holds me, I don't know. And truthfully, I don't care. He's here, his strength and warmth surrounding me. That's all that matters. Silence. Precious, world-stopping silence. He says my name again.

A blur of movements follow. Rushed hands pull at shirt and pants, scrambled steps push me to the bed. His lips, they fall and fall against me, sucking and swirling frantically against skin. I rise too quickly, the heat too fast to control. Firmly, hands against fresh plaster, I push him away. “Scott--”

Red lenses find my eyes and he begins to unbutton his shirt. “Do you trust me, Logan?” On my waist, he looks down at me, takes my hand and places it over his heart. A strong, steady rhythm. Silence as he waits for my answer.

“Scott, maybe we should talk--”

Good hand to my heart silences me. I feel his heartbeat match my own, a purposeful act, a twin pace, sped up just slightly. With a too-confident voice, “Do you trust me, Logan?” Hand slides from heart to hair, fingers curl just under skull. He bends forward and gingers his lips to mine. Soft, warm, a pink-sky dawn over rolling waters. This kiss is not vanilla, not lusty, not yearning. No, this kiss is truth.

I taste his secrets, dark little shadows that hide in the crevices of his words. The loss he never speaks of. His parents, his brothers, his children, his lovers. The pain of mangled memories and villainous possession. His constant failure and life of regret. But more than that, another truth behind it all. A love. His love for me. Unspoken, unable to be spoken of out of fear of tarnishing, destroying, poisoning it all yet again. He wants to protect me, to save me, to show me my worth.

He deepens the kiss, and fills me with more of his truth, a harder truth, the one he gives secretly to others without their knowing. He will make the sacrifice, if he can't find another way. Prove to the world that I'm a good man, a better man than they have ever imagined. More than anything, he wants me to feel loved, needed, respected. To feel deserved. Overwhelmed, I accept his truth, devour it, cherish it.

“Do you trust me, Logan?” he whispers, breaking the kiss at last. I nod. He smiles.

Off my waist, he lays on the bed beside me, red lenses glancing across my naked form. Hand whorls over chest, lips against neck. “Good,” he nearly laughs and leans over me to open the side table drawer. He places the lube in my hand, and pushes pillows and blankets under my head until I'm nearly sitting. “We'll do this my way, then.”

A deep kiss that breaks from mouth and sweeps across jaw and down my neck. Hand and mouth scavenge deep moans from my chest, trailing from pleasure to pleasure, seeking, sucking, finding. Down my body, over arms and abs, then further. He grips me softly, like something precious. Tender kisses to shaft and crown that send the beginning of thrill through my spine.

When I reach for him - to pull him back into my mouth, to keep him safe from the animal within - he stays me, pushes me back against pillows with good hand and a smile. A reminder that he trusts me.
Leaning back, plush to pillows, I let his lips slip over me. Sienna hair bobs up and down, my erection growing inside his mouth, hardening. My hips swim up to meet him, thrusting into the back of his throat. I can feel it in my blood. The animal. Rising. Subdued and tamed by the demands of soft floral and jungle vanilla. It waits, roils, swims within the waves of indulgence as he suction me into and out of his mouth.

Sparks of energy sift through nerves, dazing thoughts to singular focus. His movements, his tongue mesmerize. He’s memorized me, knows exactly what to kiss, what to lick, what to suck, swirl, linger on, and dash against. My cock throbbing inside his mouth, ready burst, I grab at his hair, pull him back. “You’re not ready yet,” I breathe, my hungry reflection in red lenses. He smiles.

To my side, his mouth sucking deep pink marks upon my neck, his body smother next to me. His erection rubs against my thigh in unconscious motion, his hand twined inside my hair. I make a concerted effort with the lube. It’s so damn hard to concentrate with him all over me like he is. I urge him up, knees bent and ass open, his head buried onto my shoulder. I collapse my arms around him, careful of plastic shores, keep him still as he continues to draw sensation from ear and neck and shoulders and anything he can reach.

He pauses, for just a moment, when I find his hole with slicked up finger. I edge past tight rim and feel his body tense up over me, his glasses pressuring into my head at the first intrusion. His breath in my ear, he mutters soft curses of delight that spur the heat in my groin near to overflowing. “Fuck... oh, Logan...” he pants when I manage to glaze his prostrate. A nip at my ear as I continue to probe, urging him to relax, to open himself to me. A second finger slips beyond boundaries, and his vanilla voice calls to the beast once again.

Primed – his hips an unconscious ocean, lulling back and forth with my finger – he pulls himself together, his thoughts, his plans. Lifting himself from the strength of my arms, he crawls back onto me, and firmly grips my length. “Do you trust me, Logan?” he breathes, baritone quiet and desirous. He strokes me, up and down, licking me with cum and want. He waits for my nod, before positioning himself to take the plunge.

Hand on my chest, lips flushed and parted, he lowers himself to me. As crown pierces his tightness, his brow creases, breath stalls. He waits, his body sipping itself into relaxation, then further. An enchantment – some heavenly spell in slow cascade, the sharp pangs of pleasure riding through my spine, and the cataclysmic rush as I watch his stoic features melt into blush rose and ecstasy – he casts upon me. Further, inch by inch, he takes me inside of him, balancing himself against my heart. I feel myself flooded with him once again, feel the predatory urges, the claws rip up from inside me, but that hand on my heart. That hand, it reminds me. He trusts me to be a better man.

He dances, his spine and abdomen, his tongue across his lips, his hips and breath. A graceful ebb and flow upon my waist, slow and steady. Achingly slow. Up and down, each sip of spilling seed sends another tsunami through my nerves. So slow, so steady, that his heart never changes pace. He strives solely for my pleasure, to keep the animal calm and in control, but that thing inside of me is hard to satisfy.

Hungering for fast and fierce, wanting to devour, I rise from pillowed perch and throw him to the bed with a thud. But, he’s prepared. On his side, quickly recovered from a sharp, pained inhaled, he latches to my arms, places gentle kisses on skin. “Logan,” he eases.

I growl.

He turns further over his shoulder, enveloping my lips with soft, sincere kisses. Sweet, special sweeps across lips, and slowly, the beast soothes. “Trust me,” he whispers. As long fingers trickle down chest and abdomen, he continues his quest along my lips. Tender little presses, a tongue across
teeth begging entrance. Tongues intertwine in staggered delirium as he again takes hold of me and centers himself for entrance. I want to invade, but so delightful is his mouth – so warm and inviting – that even the predator succumbs to his will.

Leading me inside, he begins to crest and fall again, urging me closer and closer to nerve wracking bliss. My body jolts within his movement, thrusts to stay within his tightness, to find his own pleasure within the passage. But, long fingers collapse over mine, joining, twining, calling again for trust and patience. And with each passing second, each press of hips to hilt, he gives me proof that the animal – no matter how lustrous, how filled with need, can stay within its binds. This is not about his bliss, it's about mine, and my trust in him and in myself.

I let go. His hand, my self, I release it all and let him crash, so wonderfully slow, against me again and again. Every fiber of my being, every thought, every sense attuned to the culmination. I lose track of time, of voice, of fear as his hips rock over and over. I feel it build – up my spine, over shoulders, through stomach and heart and head. My fingers curl upon his arm, the other in his hair. Static twirls and tugs as heaven begins to descend. Stars burst across my skin, white holes shine behind my eyes. Comets streak through every muscle, burning, cooling, colliding. And when it comes, when finally, finally, my body explodes inside of him, when the rush of novas and cosmic oceans finally pool and birth, my voice rings out in the silence. Deep bass pants from the bottom of stomach, dragged out in spite of myself. Hand in hair pulls him back as I flood inside of him, spilling out into soft white waves.

As bliss overtakes, I press into him, scattering hands over and across, anything to keep him near as he drinks the last few drops of me. For long moments, there is silence as the crash of nerves continues to flow throughout. Tired, serene, he pulls my arm around him, pecks kisses against my knuckles and holds me against him. The euphoric wash dazes, my thoughts lazy and uncontrolled, I whisper, “I love you.”

When I wake – some hours later – to the blaring of alarm and coming patrol, my bed is empty. Fear wrangles me from the blankets tucked under shoulders. In a rush, I scurry the room looking for remnants of him, and when my thoughts finally settle, I find them. All of them. His folded pile of clothes in the closet floor, his extra visor hidden in bedside drawer, his aftershave on the sink. Such small consolations in the scheme of things.

I told him that I loved him. He didn’t respond.
A telepathic call from Mindee Cuckoo, and my patrol – me, Rogue, Hep, Anole, and Bobby - makes its way from midtown to portside in not-a-rush. She tells us to be casual, take our time. We're not expected for at least an hour.

The request gives us all a bit of the shakes – shakes of heads, a few fists, Anole's jaw – and then a few deep breaths as we try to figure out what the hell's going on. Both Victor and Hepzibah hate dock duty – Anole for the slaughter of innocent fish, Hep because seeing all that fish makes her hungry, and she's already gained a pound and a half from eating too much tuna. Drake thinks it has to do with Namor, Rogue the ship captain that we never tracked down.

While Victor, Hep and I stick to the ground, Rogue and Drake hit the air. Coms ring clear for the first time since all this Osborne shit started. Not a spark o' static or stinging hiss, every word of our chatter comes out clean. “Cyke must have finally gotten the system fixed,” Bobby says some feet above us. “'Bout time, eh?” While his alto twitters with a chuckle, he's just hiding his worry.

Out of the original X-men, Bobby has the rep for being a slacker. Even through all of Cyclops' hounding and training, it wasn't until a few years ago – during some insane body switch with Emma – that he started taking his powers more seriously. The baby, the joker, the lackadaisical attitude, Bobby clowns his way free and clear of most of the X-drama, taking his punches and bouncing back with snappy asides and practical jokes. But every once in a while, he grows up.

A long com silence as Bobby mulls whatever words he's got rolling in his mind. Even twenty feet above me, I can see the thoughts pour over him. The numerous showdowns, up-all-nights, and locked doors. Rumor has it that One-eye's finally hit breakdown mode, and as much faith as Drake has in his long-time leader, it's hard not to believe it. “How many days?” he finally asks, and though the question's ambiguous, we each know what he means.

The mystery missions. The drag 'n drops, the specifically odd questions, fake bomb searches, and other weirdness that not a one of us can fathom. Though mum's been the word on these strange little egg chases Summers keeps sending us on, they haven't been exactly secret. Little slips here and there, the odd shrug or glance to the floor. Sometimes, it's just frustration, like Ali's little spiel last week over cancelling a show so she could stand in the middle of downtown for three hours and report in whenever she saw a green t-shirt. There was Santos and his donut deliveries to six dozen downtown office spaces, which everyone heard about because he was not allowed to eat the donuts. BoomBoom's beach escapade three days ago – which left her crispy as a cruller – that had her dropping old pennies along the shore every two feet, and took her damn near seven hours to finish.
I don't know for sure how many he's sent us on, or even all the details, but thinking about it now, I realize that two days ago - the day Summers asked for my trust - all those missions came to a halt. No stifled talk over sidewalk chalk, two a.m. wake up calls to buy three cups of convenient store coffee, or six hours riding the bus on a loop.

Before we gather our heads to answer, we hear Ann Marie's quiet curse over com, “Oh crap.” Rogue stops mid-air, green eyes wide and suddenly stunned. A good ten feet ahead of Drake, with keen eyes borrowed from Laura earlier that morning, she slams on her com button. “Y'all,” she whispers, “I got a bad, bad feelin' about this.”

It takes only moments before we're all in the air- Hep and Vic riding tail on Drake's ice slide, and me dangling from Rogue's arms. Though still twenty minutes out from our call time, Rogue's alarm pushes our pace.

Ten minutes later, we arrive at the docks. Chock full of media mayhem and police sirens, our first thoughts turn to the Atlanteans and Namor's declared war on humanity. Bobby gives us each an I-told-you-so look, but his gander and gloat quickly dissipate with One-Eye's glaring reprimand over hissing com. “You were told an hour, not fifty minutes.”

He's standing funny. That's what I notice first when I finally spot him at the edge o' the docks. His posture just a touch too straight, his shoulder hunched up three centimeters too high. His gait steps too short for his long legs, and slow – not in a sneaky way, or cautious way – but like someone's scratched his spine or broken something new.

Another fuzzy com, and we start heading to the front of the crowd where microphones and cameras have been set up. Mayor Sinclair stands off to the right, the chief of the NYPD to the left. Reporters yak away in the bull pit, and a massive group of onlookers camp the area shouting chants and carrying signs. Riot police with gas masks and plastic shields crowd back against a large group of anti-mutant protestors as we hedge through, doing their best to guard us against a slurry of thrown rocks and insults. A few of the boys in blue come to our aid, apologizing for the mess, a few others give us the snub, sticking their noses in the air at our continued involvement.

More than one reporter tries to get a comment, sticking black foamed mikes in our faces. A thousand flashes snap warning of unguarded pictures, and a stranger few reach out notebooks and pens in hopes of an autograph. It's a scene, a massive one, and at the head of it all is Scott fucking Summers, his ruby red visor hiding nerves and the jolts of doubt from those who'll never know better. To the world, he looks like a penultimate leader – all cool head and confidence – but to us, knowing his aversion to these types o' fandangos, he looks in over his head. With small, stiff nods, he gestures us behind him on the makeshift stage. A show of force or just-in-case-protection from Osborne's goons, I'm not sure, but we line up without question. A hushed conversation with Sadie, then another with SFPD, and Cyclops hits the mic. A testing tap, a glance towards a nearby sound guy, he clears his throat.

The speech is memorized, probably cleared by a dozen handlers from the mayor's office long before air time. It outlines the mutant struggle, reiterates our move to the off-coast asteroid, repeats the sentiment to protect the population of SF and the rest of the world despite the continued hatred of the mutant species. Under Scott's firm diction and stoic baritone, the speech lacks both inspiration and threat. Though a good writer will surely glean a few soundbites here and there, I have doubts that he'll make the evening news. That is, until, he drops the bombshell. “Recently, due to the spate of attacks against the Atlantean kingdom, His Majesty, King Namor has chosen to suspend his promise of brotherhood with Utopia.” He pauses, allows the sudden swell of murmurs and fright to dwindle. “I have come here today to offer assurance, that any attack upon this city – be it from mutants or
human agents – will be treated as an attack upon Utopia. Regardless of differences, threats, or prejudice, we, the X-men and the whole of the mutant population, pledge our continued support and protection of the world, even – no, especially – from one of our own.”

Though harangued by the onslaught of terrified, overzealous reporters, Scott Summers takes no questions. Too-short steps lead off the right where Mayor Sinclair and her retinue of aides wait their turn to speak. Another hushed conversation, complete with nods and worried smiles, and Cyclops gestures for us to follow. “Head back to Utopia,” he commands once Sadie starts her own little moment of press worthiness. “Angel will have further instructions. Operation Save Our Shores begins in two hours.”

If all that isn't enough to set our hearts a-flutter with anxiety, then the sight of Betsy Braddock – premiere telepath and expert ninja – flaunting her stuff outside of Utopian halls surely does. The flash pan of a dozen cameras zoom immediately on Psylocke's luxurious curves. She smiles for the cameras, twisting torso to show off her dazzling silhouette. “Thought you weren't supposed to --” Rogue begins before her voice trails off with some measure of horror.

Too caught up in shock to realize the sudden proximity of telepath-ogling news outlets and their blasted mics, Bobby blurts out a sentence that'll kick a dozen special alerts across prime time TV every hour until New Years, “We're at war with Atlantis, aren't we?”

Displeasure turns Slim's face one shade of immediate volcano, but other than that, his face remains still and stoic in his unwillingness to provide the herd of reporters any more fuel for their sensational fires. Without a word, he turns from us and with slowed steps makes his way back to the waiting detectives. Bets gives an awkward shrug and follows closely behind.
Chapter Summary

The War Room.

Chapter Notes

A short chapter, but big transition, maybe.

“Too many secrets.” Huddled up in the corner of the War Room next to Box and Nemesis, McCoy repeats himself again before finally succumbing to Warren's continued silence. Like a dog on a ham hock, I can see the words chew through Beast, snipping lips upward into scowl, and spouting flames behind low blue eyes. Arms over chest, he searches the room for allies. His eyes dart from Madison Jeffries to Rogue, Alison to Kurt, Sam to Dani, and finally settle upon me.

Finding no allies among us, I watch the furball consider his next argument carefully. Jaw moves back and forth, head tilts to the right, thin lips pull down with displeasure. He grunts, shakes his head, then addresses Warren again. “We should be evacuating Utopia, not playing another one of Cyclops' games.”

His words play on a million worries running through the War Room right now. He talks a game of numbers and tempers, of too many decisions left in the hands of a madman. He reminds us all of how Scott's changed since Apocalypse nearly destroyed him; how he's gone from the respected leader to a man on the verge; a man with power and no system of checks and balances. He recounts the carelessness, the mistakes. The Cyclops we used to know would never have ignored those containers, expelled Xavier's wisdom from Head Table, or left any of us to be tortured. The Cyclops we used to admire has become a monster; making enemies right and left; forcing us to follow orders that would have turned our stomachs just a few years ago. “His decisions – from his locked-door policy to moving us to Utopia – has put the entire mutant race in grave danger. By gathering us into one place, we've become sitting ducks, if you haven't noticed. Once the world realizes how weak our position is, how long do you think it will take for them to blow us out of the water?”

Warren doesn't even bother to look up from the stack of papers he's reviewing. “You have a better plan, then?”

Just like Storm and Emma before him, Beast ruffles and stumps at the question. Another back seat driver tryin' to navigate without a map. But, unlike 'Ro and Frost who soundly accepted their defeat, Hank decides to push the issue even further. “It's hard to make a better plan when you don't know the plan we're following.”

“Don't play semantics, McCoy.” Looking down at his cup of grimace inducing coffee, Jeffries sighs and takes another sip. “You haven't been shy about your disapproval of Summers for months. If you actually had a plan - any plan at all - I'm sure you'd be shouting it from mountaintops.”

“If you had any intelligence,” Beast snuffs, “you wouldn't follow that lunatic so blindly.”
“And you wouldn't discount a plan without knowing what it is.” A logic circle, and one that Box is proud of judging by the way he chinks his cup to the table in a moment of victory. Holding up the number three, Jeffries smiles wide as Beast's anger melts away. “Three strikes, Henry, you're out. How many more times are we going to argue about this today?"

For Henry McCoy, Jeffries' words don't signal a mere defeat, it's a realization that he's lost his place among us. He's no longer the bouncing blue behemoth, no longer the smartest guy in the room. He's just another number, and his complaints, his wisdom, his words mean nothing. I feel for Hank, I do. While he makes some valid points, his months of moaning and groaning have destroyed his carefully crafted reputation as the best and brightest among the X-men. So full of venom for one of his oldest friends, his wisdom reeks of pettiness, an attempt to strike back at Cyclops for every mistake he's ever made.

"For someone called the Beast," Box continues, his voice as sour as the coffee, "you sure do a fine impression of a coddled toddler. Did Summers forget to hold your hand and tell you it'll all be okay this morning? Does itty-bitty McCoy need a shoulder cry on?"

"Mockery doesn't suit you, Madison,” he says in an attempt to hold back both anger and futility.

"No more than this passive-aggressive behavior suits you. How many times does the man have to apologize before you finally let it go?" A shrug and a roll of eyes, Jeffries looks at the ceiling and shakes his head. Then, to Warren, “That coffee machine has anger issues. That's why the brew's always burnt. Remind me after this over, and I'll give it a talking to.”

Shut down, shut out, the sting in Beast's eyes become glass and heartbreak. Lips stretched down and a soft, pained shake of head, he hunches himself to the door. He looks at us - his broken heart on his sleeve - and lingers for long moments in the ensuing silence. "I'm sorry you were hurt, Henry," Warren says softly. "We all are. But right now -"

"Right now, you've got more important things to deal with. Yes, I've realized that." It's a knife and a sword and a fucking nuclear bomb all at once. "Like I said, we're not people anymore. We're numbers. Soldiers. He's freezing our hearts to make us into an army so the world will fear us. I'm sorry, but the survival of the mutant race is not worth the cost of our souls. I can't watch him do this to you anymore."

Shame turns cheeks red, eyes down. On me, on Rogue, Kurt, Dani, all of us, save Jeffries. We just turned away one of our own, ousted him from his family, treated him like trash. Dani insists that Warren go after him, that we hear him out because some of what he said made sense. Sam agrees that we're sitting ducks, Kurt that Slim's changed. Rogue mentions the locked doors and the absence of Head Table. They point out countless mistakes, overlooks. Things that could and should change. His attitude, his coldness, his threats, his arrogance. They discuss the press conference, Emma, Namor, Betsy. More than once, they mention his temper, his lack of compromise, his refusal of discussion. The chatter builds into a hate storm, with every insult gaining an injury, until even Kurt is ready to hoist the red flag of mutiny.

Nothing they say surprises me. It's the same old shit that people've been saying for years, including me. One-eye's good at playing war, but clueless about damn near everything else. From his inability to relax to the strange way he smiles. They joke about past Christmas presents they've received from him - how practical, how useful; tool sets and language books; almanacs and world maps - and how even on holidays he doesn't understand the concept of merriment. He has no sense of humor. No sentimentality. He lectures the kids on the proper way to fold their socks; deems dessert a waste of both time and calories; has never used a metaphor in conversation. He's a hard ass on a mission with nowhere else in the world to go save a War Room and an empty bed. In a matter of minutes, Scott
Summers is reduced to an inconsiderate mess of a man that had to be lectured before he'd call Kurt by his name. "Nightcrawler. Always Nightcrawler. I had to beg him to call me Kurt." On it goes, from his alphabetized bookshelf to his countless spare visors, they dismantle and ridicule, their anger becoming vicious and cruel with laughter.

“When you’re finished bashing Scott behind his back, we'll get started.” Warren's gaze slicks across the table, holding us each entrenched in his grim disappointment. Blue eyes hold on me the longest, heavily displeased by my lack of words.

I have my reasons for not defending One-eye. Cyke's been digging his own grave lately, and while I might give him a few free passes for some of the shit that he does – his whole hot-cold-broken-faucet crap when it comes to me, for example – I won't overlook everything. I'm still pissed that he sent Ems away. Concerned that he didn't deal with those damn cargo containers. Fucking outraged that he declared war on Atlantis on national television without a word to the wise. The way I see it, if people want to bitch and moan about his shaky decision making lately, then I'm all for it. If the talk gets loud enough, maybe someone will finally step up to the plate and relieve Slim of some of his burden. The guy has enough fucking issues as it is. The added weight of mutant extinction's just fuel on the flames, and the cracks – the ones that Warren swears don't exist – are finally beginning to show.

And, truth be told, Summers is a big boy, and every once in a while, he needs a comeuppance, if only to pull him out of dick mode for a week or two. Reset the score, deflate his ego, make him a bit more tolerable. But then, maybe I'm still pissed off that the mother fucker didn't even bother to answer me. Even a nod would've been nice, a thank you, something to let me know that he heard me, that I hadn't scared him off. Either way, I shrug off Warren's blue eyed guilt trip with a snide grunt. Arms crossed to chest, I lean back in my seat and motion for him to get on with it.

Meeting turns chaotic shortly after Flyboy hands us each an envelope and a handful of coms. With no more explanation than that, he's ready to send us on our way. That's when the yelling starts, the accusations, the full-on hate for the dutiful despot and his little trove of secrets. Summers has never expected blind loyalty before, never made calls without reason, never made people so damn miserable. “Call it bashin' if you want, sugah,” Rogue spits, “but I guarantee if he were here, I'd say it to his face. With Psylocke out on the field, and that damn press conference, we deserve to know what's goin' on. What the hell happened between Namor and Cyke?”

The coup begins. Questions turn to accusations. Admonished guilt to repugnant anger. Even I get in on this one, pointing out that even Cyclops makes mistakes. "Exactly," Rogue agrees, "And he's been makin' an awful lot lately, if y'all ask me, includin' his little stunt today. We ain't in no shape to take on Atlantis, even he's gotta know that. He wants us to follow his him, but how can we follow someone if we don't what they're thinking?"

“Idiot.” All eyes turn to Box once again. Taking a long sip from navy blue mug, brown eyes finally center on Rogue with a smug, annoyed expression. “Use your logic, Kentucky-fried.” A self-described not-a-people-person, Box's insults are meant to not just to stall, but to wound. And just like Beast, his words cut Ann Marie deep. “Do I really have to spell this out for you? Seriously?” An amazed, exhausted laugh, Jeffries runs slender fingers through his hair. “No wonder Summers is a fucking bag of peanuts. You guys have the memory span of goldfish.”

“That whole thing about goldfish is a myth,” Sam's hillbilly twang rises through the silence. Half joking, half serious, his large blue eyes look to Jeffries for confirmation.

“I'm surprised we didn't go extinct year ago.” With another wry laugh, Jeffries pours himself another cup of joe. A seriousness – harsh and disbelieving – tugs the corner of lips into a disappointed scowl.
“If you can’t figure out that Summers went quiet because of those gas guns, then we’re doomed no matter what he does.”

The way he said it. My whole body freezes, like a thin film of ice trickling down my veins. My stomach starts to churn. My head spins. Not only does Madison Jeffries know the plan, but Summers– being the fucking stubborn asshole that he is – is going to do something stupid to put an end to all this bullshit.

Warren's quick to notice my alarm and quicker to try and quell it. “No deviations,” he commands. “Follow every order, no matter what, and we'll get through this. Atlantis will no longer be a threat. Do you understand?” Dead in the eye, Worthington keeps my focus. A raise of brow, he demands an answer. Eventually, reluctantly, I nod.
Chapter Summary

Fish and glory.

Chapter Notes

Sorry it took so long for an update, but hopefully this is okay.

“Nothing you could've done, bub.”

Forty-two kids. Dead.

Stripped of power, of birthright, hexed out of anything that could have given defense, the missile struck them down in a matter of moments. Summers stood midst the Danger Room carnage, his fingers twitching over his game of strategy, inspecting and tweaking, revising even the smallest of details, right down to the reflective stripe on the kids' backpacks and the pitch of the alarm in the background. He’d make his changes and press the button. Restart that whole ten minutes of carnage.

Every sound, every vision, every lick of flame that swept across that bus of corpses played out in slow motion. Their screams, their agonized cries for help. The futile rush to save them. Again and again and again. At times he paused the sequence, walked through the violence, inspected the bus, the rescuers. Other times, he reorganized the variables, rearranged his team and teachers. Emma stood first by the bus door, then next to the mansion, the rear of the bus, on the bus. Sam, Petey, me, every student, every teacher pieced out through the war zone as strategy clicked overtime in his head. Emma warned me of his volatile mood, but three days of this bs had finally gotten under my skin. There were more important things than playing guilt trip. “Slim--”

The red glimmer behind his visor put me on defense. Hands up over my face, I peaked through spread fingers to watch as anger burned over jaw and into fists. “You're wrong,” he explained. Long, calloused fingers scoured across buttons. He had the proof. He found it three days ago. He would show it to me.

Scenario reset – this time with Sam at the side of the house, Petey at the rear of the bus, and himself at the front – he pressed play again. The missile struck, the screams hit the air, the X-men rushed in. “We could have saved a life,” he explained quietly, watching as his Danger Room doppelganger blew beams through windows to give the kids another exit. Smoldering bodies passed from arm to arm, cradled across mansion grounds into the medical ward. Colossus shielded an impact-flung student from hitting the ground. Sam managed to douse the raging inferno before the rest of us entered, preventing further injury and chaos. In all, the re-envisioned scenario only cost Cyclops half his face and a leg, a price far less than the death of any one of those kids.

“And, we could have saved more,” he said, recalling his earlier scenario. He walked me through the changes, his mistakes, his follies. Had he ordered the bus parked closer, mansion security would have dinged the missile earlier. Keeping flyers overhead would have earned us extra time to spot the
trajectory. An organized brigade would have gotten students freed sooner, out of the flames, out of danger. Even without prior knowledge of the attack, basic precautions would have prevented so many deaths.

What he called tactical diligence, I called repression. Putting his energy into fixing and solving, planning and scheming left him with no space to mourn. A three-sixty turn to double check, he pressed play again, his whole self a rock-hard wall against the flurry of screams and spewing flames. This time, I was beside him, ripping up bus walls like paper while he leapt inside to blast the children free of buckles and melted seats. His computerized version ran through the bus, grabbing up kids by the armful, tossing them through shredded metal, then attempting to shield them from a secondary blast when flames hit the fuel lines.

Cyke’s flame-drowned body pummeled to the back of the bus, banged against still locked emergency doors. Unconscious, the flames ripped through his computerized flesh. Dripping skin and ashen bones, he continued to watch in silence. “Twelve,” he said when the scenario reached it’s end. “We could have saved twelve.”

I looked down at the embers of his corpse, red lens blackened and cracked from heat, still smoking bones and bubbling skin contorted into nothing less than pain. I listened to his list of deaths and injuries; how he didn’t want Sam to lose his arms or Piotr is eyes. He was sure he could prevent that, too. “How many times have you died so far, Slim?” I asked, realizing that he didn't count himself among casualties. His death – to him – meant nothing.

He shrugged off my question, tilting head to the right to inspect the scene again. “I think I can save twenty,” he spoke – not to me, to himself. A mantra of self-induced punishment.

“Scott, how many times have you killed yourself the past three days?” Computer program or not, that he didn’t care, that he didn’t pause, or even react to his own death frightened me. Avoiding the answer, he started reprogramming the scenario, recalculating positions and commands. A drift of sweet scented ozone and iron-taint, an undercurrent of cyprus and murky swamp. A primal gift – that breeze of death wish. Easy prey - a full stomach with a lack of fight, a means to an end for both hunter and the tired-of-living. My stomach panged in sudden hunger, the need to feast near overwhelming, but thank beer that something else roiled through my veins then, too.

The thought of loss, a sick deep pit in the middle of my chest, drove me to desperation. I’d lost him once to Apocalypse, and then the months thereafter. Lost his heart, his soul, his fucking mind. Sat silent as I watched a shadow seep into his depths, spur himself to isolated rooftops and empty rooms, stew in whatever turmoil the Darwinian dick had left behind. I thought he’d finally recovered, but I realized – as murkwood and honey pulsed from him in waves – that he’d simply hidden it away, stored it deep to avoid the questions, and not a one of us noticed. “Fuck.”

I made my first grab for the controls. Blocked by beams, I hit the floor, his focus never once wavering from his mission. Harried fingers continued to program and maneuver the objects around him. The bus moved five inches to the left, Sam started from the west, Colossus at the rear. A second lunge across the floor as he pushed play, our bodies intertwining with the rehearsed memory. I ran zigzag between Emma and Noriko, but missed Santo's sudden rush for the bus. Bashed against stone, I faltered backwards, just as the real Cyke entered the bus for an up-close view of his own inferno.

Pissed as hell, I raced forward, trampling a digital Emma in the process. If he saw me coming, he didn’t care. Standing beside the driver, visor turned towards me as I hopped the three steps onto the bus, he missed his only shot before I caught him by the collar and held him fast against the walls. He
fumbled the controls behind his back, jiggling hands between visor and his game of keep away; and attempted to keep his focus on the mirage around us. I threw him through the flames, into the volcano of burning children, through the aisle as his digital copy wrested kids from their torment. Red beams – both real and imagined - bounced off ceiling and seats puncturing sidewalls and costume. Still he fought, even as my own doppelganger ripped through metal to grab the screaming kids. I pushed over him over seats. He kicked me off my feet. I struck him to the ground with adamantium elbow, he responded with concussive beams to my knees. I drove him through the flames from driver's seat to the back of the bus yelling and growling and cursing, calling his name and telling him what a stupid fuck off he was for all this shit. It was the mention of Jean that caught him off guard. Her name sprayed out midst flames, coiled off tongue to remind him that he owed her. “She died saving your ass, bub, saving all our asses. This shit right here? It dishonors her memory worse than you fucking around with Emma.”

He stopped. Everything about him from heart to hands, his feet his legs, his breath stopped cold at the mention of her name. His face didn't change. He didn't look sad or angry, didn't laugh or smile. He didn't say anything, didn't jump or drop to his knees. He just stopped. So, I made my move.

I trapped him -the real him - against emergency doors, claws plunged to either side of his neck, the third near to puncturing his precious throat. Before he could toss the controls through the flames and onto the ground below, Petey's hard light body ripped the emergency doors open, tumbling us both out to the ground. A quick lunge, and I knocked from his feet again, wrestling him into submission on charred black driveway.

Summers endured the sudden deft of my admanatium punches, stitching controls beneath his back for safekeeping. His hand shot out, gripping under chin to push me way, when suddenly the second explosion had me hitting pavement, covering my head with hands and waiting for the noise to stop busting my ear drums. Flaming debris and metal slashed through air, singeing Colossus' clothes and metallic skin. With a child in his arms, Petey ran from the blast looking for anyone to help.

In distinct contrast to the stoic steel of reality, Summers' computerized self hit the ground with a silent scream of agony. Burning, flailing, jaw hinged wide with insufferable pain, Scott's burning corpse melted across us, collapsing bone by bone to the ground.

Not a flinch, his voice vague, unanimated, “How many that time?”

Desensitized to his own death, the swarm of swamp and murk thick in the air, I was afraid to let him move; afraid that if I let go, he’d find a way to make it real. He’d find his volcano, his inferno, his mountain of flames and death.

I held him still, his legs buckled between my knees and his shoulders pressed to the floor. Around us, the final screams of dying children filtered through the air, and the vacant orange of lustrous flames ran sick across his bruised face. He swallowed the blood from loose teeth, licked at cracked lip. Visor turned face to face with his charred skull, the last remnants of flesh and metallic visor dripping off into black-red puddles on the driveway. His face didn't move, no worry, no sadness, just a blank fucking slate. After eons of silence – of watching the trickle of blood and matter drip through empty eye sockets and jaw - he turned to me again. “It’s okay, Logan,” he whispered, “I’m not my son. I can’t go back in time. I won’t die in the bus attack.”

The hollowness in his voice skewered my chest. Distant, tired. I tried to find him behind the visor, looked for shielded eyes, but saw nothing other than the glare of lights on red. Emma's voice – frantic and devastated – called across the hologram. Cried out for the murdered children and her savaged love. She called his name, bending down, her hard light hair brushing his true-to-life lips and cheeks. He watched her, the same amount of nothing on his face as he listened to her cry. Were
she real, he would have felt her breath, her tears, as she gathered his ashes against her heart, turned them to wet, grey silt in her grief.

“How many times are you gonna make her cry for the dead?” I asked after his face shifted away from her pain-struck features.

“She won’t cry for long,” he answered quietly. And just like that, she coated herself in diamond skin, face hard and dusted with black destruction. Hands on hips, she barked a never-ending stream of orders until the scenario came to an end. “She never does.”

I wasn’t sure how to take his little quip – if this was all some poor-little-lonely-me crap, or if he truly doubted her. Almost balking, “She loves you, Scott.”

A simple, honest response, “And I love her, but she doesn’t need to cry.” Another long pause and the first flinch of right cheek. Either he’d realized how much of an asshole he was being, or his words had more meaning than what he wanted to portray. Quickly recovered, the slight tightening of lips gone, his words were too-matter-of-fact to hold weight, “It’s a computer program, Logan. That’s all it is.”

I couldn't tell where he was looking – at me, at Emma, at the bus full of burned up children. Three directions, and I couldn't tell his focus. Yet, the rest of him proved even more ambiguous. His calm, strong voice; his odd words; his next to nothing heartbeat; the swamp musk that drowned my senses. “Scott, you've been killing yourself for three days. Computer program or not, that's not-”

“Going to bring them back. I know. But, if I can prevent something like this from ever happening again, then...It's worth it.”

How to Win a War 101: kill them before they kill you. But, apparently, ol One-Eye didn't take that particular class 'cause five minutes before Warren scatters us to the streets in search of fish and glory, he tells us not to kill. “No murder, no slaughter, no grievous injury,” he says, his voice firm. “Cyclops' orders.”

Nightcrawler’s port team drops my team in midtown before taking off to parts unknown. While the action's all normal, the look on his face as he listens to orders puts me on edge. Shoulders slumped, midnight lips unconsciously drawn up into worry, he glances at me before looking away. Another nod, and a press of lips, his dark brow hovers close to worried eyes. “Heard,” he says quietly into com, before turning his back completely and ordering his team away. We watch them disappear one by one before venturing off to our own mark at the small kiosk just outside the courthouse.

An evacced city is a quiet city, and with Angel having put us all on separate com channels, the silence is damn near sickening. No traffic, no chatter, no blaring sirens or honking horns. It makes the rats in the alleys and the pigeons preening on rooftops sound like the fucking demons that wait for us all at the end of the world. Their chomping and chewing, scratching and pecking as they seek their territory - mark their piles of waste with the stench of piss and warning musks – echoes through the ghosted streets, reminding us all of who we actually are. They fight tooth and nail for their squalor, kill for the cracked open bones and rotten bread; slaughter for their tiny homes on the eaves of buildings, or their nests within the wasted and forgotten. The only difference between us and them is that they can have babies. Hundreds and millions of babies, raise 'em all to lord over their dumpster kingdoms, to continue their wars, their cycle of death. But mutants, the Scarlett Witch took that away from us.

Their angry squawk of rats and cats, pigeons as doves as they fight for their leftovers midst the
garbage and refuse becomes the worms of our thoughts – those enraged little spaces between logic and love - those violent and loathsome places that we hide behind platitudes and mantras of peace. Xavier's dream is a nice little pillow when laying down for the night, but in the middle of a war, it's just more weight on the shoulders. We're not supposed to kill, Slim says, but he hasn't told us how we're supposed to survive. This ain't no fucking Blob or Juggernaut, this is Atlantis. This is Namor. And as strong as we are, as calculating as Cyke is, I seriously doubt that he truly understand the fish king's true power.

Worse though, this ain't even the war we thought we'd be fighting. This shit between Summers and McKenzie, it's so fucking rotten that even Dom's constant excuses for our de facto leader are wearing thin. While Wolfsbane mentions the containers, Boom Boom talks about that shoreline fight and Dust the press conference. Dom shrugs it off as best she can, chalking half up to luck and the rest to the realm of possibility. “Maybe Namor declared war by homing pigeon?”

“Homing pigeon?” Tail curled behind her, Hepzibah tilts her head in thought. “How does one say war with bird house?”

“We don't even know if Namor did declare war.” Warpath's eyes slick up the tall buildings, across the scattered lights of offices and living rooms. “I think it's a preemptive strike.”

“You mean, like what Cable wouda done?” Boom Boom asks unconvinced.

“Like father, like son,” he replies with a chuckle. There's regret in his voice, this quite little shake that Double B doesn't notice. As much as he's loathed to admit it, the kid's been happy here, away from all the death and defying of his X-force days. Though angry and sullen and preaching death to the masses, there's a part of him that's tired of the blood on his hands and thankful for the reprieve.

In the windows above there are silhouettes, the watchers and waiters; those that have never seen the carnage of war; those who don't dream of the gruesomeness and cruelty of battle. They wait by their windows with music blaring and beers in their hands, their faces full of smiles and fascination. Atlantis is coming; Atlantis is coming, they cheer to their parties, and holler out of those so-high-above-windows for the muties to give 'em hell.

With a smile, X-23 waves at the crowds above, gaining a cacophony of whistles and leers. A can is tossed, an empty pizza box, a shoe. They hit the ground some feet away, bust against the pavement with thud after thud. Confused, she looks at me for answers. “Just ignore them, darlin’,” I soothe. She wants to speak, to ask her question but a shake of my head quiets her down. No sense in reminding her that people are assholes, that smiles don't mean smiles, cheers don't mean cheers. That for every honest person in the world, there's fifty more with souls as rotten as fucking garbage.

Warren's voice over a fuzzy com sends us three blocks west to the rooftop of a kosher deli. I know the place well from six of the fake bomb searches Cyclops sent me on. A cozy little mom and pop shop with a basement full of smokers and picklers, a dry storage and a couple of freezers. During the day, the place stays busy with lunch orders and to-go dinners, but in the evening, all the ruckus dies down leaving the place deserted and forgotten. On more than one occasion, I watched the couple tidy up the place and shut down early, leaving me and Warren free to scour their shelves of pickles and mayo for bombs. The thought of going back there now makes my stomach flip.

It takes only minutes to reach our mark, climb the roof and fan ourselves out to watch the city from all directions. As trackers, we should adore the silence, but tonight, it stretches us taut like cat gut. Every shift of light, every trace of noise shakes down our nerves and stops our hearts. Even Rahne, her predator instincts on overload and smelling like fresh meat, can't keep up with the constant rise and fall of adrenaline. Tabs is the first to reach her, a calming hand on the shoulder that shifts between wolf and flesh with uncontrolled momentum. Wolfsbane apologizes, makes some excuse
about not getting enough sleep and tries to calm herself down. It's a lie, but I get it.

War sucks.

Chatter returns to ol' One-eye and whether or not he's using us to fix his own mistakes. Did he know what was in the containers? Did he hide them from Fishface to stop him from leaving? Is Scott being preemptive, or did Namor declare war? “His Highness did threaten to eat his family,” Dom reminds us.

“Come on, that was an empty threat,” Boom Boom laughs, “Everyone knows Cyclops' family is all dead.”

“Or in the future,” Dust adds with a silent prayer upon her lips. Though she never met Cable or the baby, she knows that Cyclops believes our very existence rides on his return.

“Or in the future,” Tabs agrees. “Unless he plans to dig up Jean's bones and make a stew—” Double B bites her tongue and holds her hand up to me in forfeit. “Too far, sorry. Claw me up after this crap is over, but admit it, Wolvie, you don't like this either.”

“No, I don't like it either, doll.”

“You're about to like it even less,” James whispers and hands me his com.

A quick look at the fuzzed out box in his hand, and I realize what he's done. “You found Cyclops' channel.”

A deep breath and a nod. He looks to Tabitha first, then to Hep, then finally to me. “Apparently, the war began twenty minutes ago. Cyke's fighting it by himself.”
XLVIII

Chapter Summary

A fishy sort of war.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The haze of battle – dust and smoke and the red wash scent of blood – still lingered over Genosha. The X-men had gone home near six hours ago, leaving clean-up to some UN peacekeeping force who kept their complaints to a cloud of impatient sighs and toe tapping, rather than risk irking my ire once again.

Even death couldn’t wash away her beauty.

Jean Grey. Dead. The world was once again colder for it, and so was he. Broken into pieces, he lay across her breathless frame, smothering himself in her flame red hair, a stream of rasped apologies cascading from his lips. He held her against his heart as tears streamed down from behind ruby visor. He wailed and sobbed, cried out his wrongs against her, his mistakes, his sins. He would give anything to see her filled with blood and warmth once again. He’d rip out his eyes, his tongue. Even his heart if she hadn’t already taken that with her.

Scott Summers was not a kind man. Years of leadership in the face of constant tragedy had turned him inward and solitary. Left him so guarded that even the slightest smile was enough to cause a month’s worth of gossip. So, to see him now, to hear the throat-sore sobs and desperate pleas was as heart breaking as it was beautiful.

“Please,” he begged, “I will never hurt you again.”

Time wore on, from afternoon to evening. To night. Tired, his cries became soft, mere whimpers of the pain still crashing through his heart.

“We need to finish this, Captain. It’s my little girl’s birthday tomorrow. I made a promise.”

“But he's still --” They wouldn't be afraid of me much longer. For hours I'd kept them at bay, hovered them off with the threat of claws and spite, but now that children and birthdays were in play, they would call in the big guns.

I heard the com-click. A call for back up. Missiles and chemicals, and all manner of death. We had worn out our welcome.

My arm wrapped around him, I pulled Scotty from the ground. Desperate, a renewed source of energy, he reached out for the cold corpse before him, but in the end, he was too tired to resist. Normally, dragging his stubborn ass away from something he wanted would have cost me an arm and a leg and half of my ribs. But hours worth of pleading, of hopelessness, of guilt had pressed him so thin that he could barely function. Tethered to the passenger seat, his daze cascaded across the endless sky, scanning clouds and stars for the Phoenix he knew would surely be coming to bring back his fair maid and pay revenge to her enemies. But the Phoenix never came, nor did his fight to
return to her side. She was dead. And with that, so was his will to continue. Flight back was good. Bully for me, I guess.

Xavier was at the door when we finally got home.

Hedged up in the corner of the bed, half in dream and half awake, Scotty muttered her name again and again, reaching out with shaking hand to grasp at the fantasies before him. Red hair and green eyes, a masterpiece of warmth and compassion, he trembled and cried. "Jean. Jean. Jean. Jean." A broken record, a repetition. Though normally I'd be prone to swat him with three lengths of adamantium, right then, all I wanted was for that single syllable to resemble something less than pain.

"Thank you for bringing him back, Logan," Xavier said. Still bruised and battered from Magneto's torture, he put up his most reassuring smile. "I'll take him from here."

"He's not okay, Chuck. He needs--"

"Don't worry, I know what he needs."

I would have argued, except I was pretty sure he was right. Xavier raised him like a son. Who was I to think that I knew better? All I'd ever been to Scott Summers was the man who'd tried for years to steal his wife, and nearly doing so on numerous occasions. To him, I was a pariah. To me, he was something unobtainable. Chuck's blue eyes met mine with a nod of certainty. No, I had no idea what Scott needed. If I had, I wouldn't have brought him back. Not here. Not where he was expected to fight, to lead, to be the chess master against all those who would seek to rule mutantkind. I didn't even know what kind of music he liked.

With as little sound as possible, I left the room. Emma waited just across the hall, her prim little lips all pursed with disgust. "You're leaving?"

"Brought him home, doll. That was my job. Chuck'll take it from here."

Platinum bangs feathered evenly just above bright blue eyes as she shook her head. Arms crossed, I could tell she wanted to speak, but kept her mouth shut. "Guess that's it then."

"Yeah, guess that's it."

Funny thing is, I don't remember running.

All I remember is the explosion. Bright orange and a mile high, it flurried up into the night sky in a plume as big as Texas and spread its ashen wings over the midnight landscape like a dying star. The trail end of Warpath's voice still upon my ears.

One second, I'm on top of a deli, the next I'm smack down in the middle of some blistering fire fight on the docks, peering through smoke and ash trying to get the lowdown on Cyke. In my ear, there's Warren ordering me to get back. In my heart, there's Scott and the blitzkrieg beat of my heart as I try to find him in the mess.

I tear through fish and fire, running towards the center of the docks with all the fury of a phantom in a hailstorm, kickin' and clawin' my way to a better view point. Atop a molten storage container, I finally find the reason for my madness, but also the reason for his.

Just as Cyclops takes another whollop from the Fish King, I see the first of the robot suited jackwipes midst the horror of the explosion. Standing right at the edge of their fight, gas gun at ready, he waits at ready for orders that have yet to come. Just beyond him another two, and beyond them another
three dozen.

“Cyclops!” I yell, but if he hears me, he doesn’t acknowledge it. I realize then that something’s wrong. Scott’s a master of akido and jui jitsu. Man’s as flexible as fucking Reed Richards when coming out of deep freeze – which is pretty damn flexible. Yet, his movements are stiff, hindered, as if those damn ribs of his are still banging around unhinged inside his chest. Back stiff as a board, he throws punches into empty air, banging against the sides of helmets and carbon tanks, trying to clear his path for Namor.

Namor greets him with a grand smile. All arrogance and apropos, he swings his fists into the face of a barely moving Cyclops. One dodge, two hits, again and again until he’s back up against a container. Hand on collar, the Fish King throws his charge through the air, blasts him back down onto the burning boards, and begins to pummel him again.

I haven't seen those eyes of his flash red since I got here. Cyke's near impossible to beat in a one on one close-up fight. All he has to do is open his eyes and you’re in the middle of the fucking Grand Ol' Opry cryin’ harder than Hank Williams. With an infinite amount of energy flowing from those eyes of his, he can keep an opponent bouncing the waves for hours, days, maybe more.

But that ain't what he's doing.

A fist to the jaw, Cyclops falls flat out onto yet unburnt dock boards. He clutches hard at his right shoulder, his brows drawn low to show the sudden shock of pain, and Namor pounds at him again and again. Blood trickles down from his nose and lip, drips out from underneath his visor. In pain, he lashes out, finally unleashing that blast of his. A red beam lights the sky like the tail of a foreboding comet, sending the Ocean King back to the waters from whence he came.

Psylocke.

Her violet hair messed with sweat and grime, she glares at me from just below my perch. “You're disobeying orders,” she says, her voice one shade of lemon and three of lime. “They haven't seen you yet. Go.”

Before I can argue, the ninja warrior is back in action, whipping her psi-knife into the guts of every fish she can find. One after another, they fall to her wind-wild kicks and the devastation of her blade. She doesn't smile, doesn't gloat. She's just a warrior – a butterfly midst the flames, fanning her wings and protecting what she loves most. Damn, she's a masterpiece. But, a masterpiece interrupted by the intentions of Mr. Squid.

A wave cascades across the docks, sweeping the feet of fish and mutant alike. Bodies go screaming across the charred remains of heavy wood, and in the corner, near inches from the mechs, Cyclops stands and stares at his enemy. Riding a whale-kicked wave, Namor points his trident at his foe. Beady black eyes narrowed into sharp grimace, he snicks a half smile upon his face. “I will drink your blood upon the next full moon.”

“And choke on it, I hope,” Cyclops retorts, mirroring Fishface’s sneer.

“You will pay for the death of my subjects.”

“Just me, then? Not my son? My daughter? My brother?” Though the visor conceals the entire truth, I see something that looks almost like hope.

Namor raises his trident high into the sky, calling upon Triton and Neptune and all the sea gods before him in a blistering yell that could split mountains. He calls for death and blood and revenge.
He calls for tribulation and torment. He calls for the skin of the man that killed his people. He will wear it as a trophy, visor and all. Wear it and lay claim to the land above. Force all to bow to his wants and desires; take what he wants when he wants, for he is Namor, King of the Seven Seas, and he is far more powerful than bargained for. “I will kill everyone you ever loved, Cyclops. Mark my words.”

The next wave is massive. A full ten feet high above the docks and three times as wide. A wave like this could wipe out half of San Francisco, but that's not what I'm worried about. I'm not worried about the well spring of waters drummed up by the creatures that swarm the ocean depths. I'm only concerned with the trident heading straight towards the heart of Scott Summers.

Psylocke is beside me just as I touch ground. Her psi-knife at ready, she lunges with the full intent of taking me down. What she has forgotten is that I know martial arts, too. Though her speed and reach are greater, I have the experience.

A palm to her jaw sends her flying to the right. She stumbles, but catches herself and doesn't fall. Psi-blade at ready, she twists left, then right, faking her moves until a high kick catches the back of my neck. I won't say it doesn't hurt, 'cause it does, and pels my vision with spots of black and heavenly white. I can feel her fingers jab at nerves and pressure points, filling my body with immobility and pain.

Flat on the ground, my hair getting singed by one of the few remaining flames behind me, I kick upward and send Betsy into the air. Shocked at first, she recovers with a tuck and roll, rising gracefully to her feet. Her plump lips turn flat into a scowl that sends my mind into a flurry. She looks over her shoulder, then right and left. “Trust him, Logan. He knows what he's doing.”

“Namor's gonna kill him.”

“Then let him die.”

She jams her psi-blade deep into my right shoulder, disabling nerves and tissue, but that was a lucky hit. For me. She aimed for my head.

I counter with a leg sweep, which she avoids and takes the opportunity to punch at my right cheek. I can only smile when I realize that she's forgotten the strength of the adamantium that laces my skeleton. Hands shaking, she jumps two steps back and tries to hide the pain of a broken hand. “Logan, you don't understand.”

“I ain't gonna let him die here. No matter how much he thinks he deserves it.” A left hook to right jaw and Betsy Braddock goes flying in the air once again. I drag her away to the roadside before once again taking my perch to find Scott Summers midst the madness of the docks.

For moments unending, all I see are the Atlanteans and their strange metal suits clomping about the mess of smoke and pooled up water. The click–hiss-click of their breathing apparatuses fills the air between the sudden splashes of water and sizzle of dying flame. As my eyes stop tearing up from the sting of smoke, and I'm able to see once again, I see the breadth of them – shoulder to shoulder, weapons at ready – surrounding a single spot at the right edge of the docks.

They've got him surrounded.

“It's a charge, Logan. That's all it is. It's what you're good at. Just swing at whatever catches your eye.”

“I ain't takin' orders from a kid who ain't had his first shave yet.”
His face didn't move. Not the brow, not the mouth. Not one inch of his face betrayed any amount of fear, worry, tension, or even fucking disappointment at my ability to perform. Blank. That's all he was. A big fucking blank.

With a click of a button, the whirs and jangles of machinery lit up the Danger Room. Robots with saws for hands, hammers for feet. Like some carpenter's nightmare after drinking twelve too many beers. They closed in for the kill not ten seconds after they began their mechanical jaunt to the center of the room. All after me. All ready for the kill.

I didn't move. He pressed pause.

"Do you not understand?"

A smile half clipped on my lips, I replied, “Maybe I need an example.”

“I can’t rip them apart with my hands like you can.”

I shrugged. “Don’t matter. Just show me what you mean by a charge the best way you know how.”

Again, his face didn’t move. He pressed the top left button and watched without excitement as the droid moved back against the wall. “You know this is an easy scenario, right?”

I laughed. “Sure. Just want to see you in action, bub.”

It was rare that I took the time to appreciate beauty, but this was one of those moments. Decked out in his skin tight uniform, his muscles already warm from forcing me to stretch and prepare, he wrecked himself across the saw-fisted droids, flipping and turning and blasting each and every one until there was nothing left but the illusion of metal chunks and half-destroyed gears. “Understand now?” he asked as he wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead.

“Didn’t realize you could sweat, Cyke.”

All business, he ignored the comment and adjusted the controls once again. “It’s a frontal assault --”

“A frontal assault?”

For the first time, a slip of confusion lowers his left brow. “An attack from the front.”

“What about an assault from the rear?”

Barely a hesitation. “If it takes down the droid, then yes. When I say charge, I mean go wild with it, Logan. Attack as you can.”

“So, coming in from the rear is perfectly fine with you?” The boy was fucking clueless. A professional nod, and he rewound the scenario. In an instant, the broken droids were little more than air as new ones appeared against the wall. “How the fuck?”

“Hard light,” Cyclops explained. “A Shi’ar system the professor installed. What your fighting isn’t real, so don’t feel bad about attacking the bots.”

Before I could make some comment about the hardness of light, Jeannie enters, her red hair and angelic face all aglow with everything I thought I wanted out of life. On her tip toes, she pressed a smooch against leader-boy's face and turned her brightest smile upon me, then back to One-eye. “Another easy one, I take it?” She smiled again and wrapped her arm around his waist. “He only argues when the mission’s too easy. Maybe you should take it up a notch.”
“Basic terminology, hon,” the boy explained. “He didn't seem to understand frontal assault.”

“Oh, really?” A flash of darkness followed by that sun-lit smile. “I'm sure he understands now. Come on, Logan. My boyfriend is two hours late for his date. Let's finish this up so I can snag him for the rest of the night.”

Claws bash against the metallic cords of breathing machines and out-of-water suits. One by one, the fish drop to the ground, grasping at necks and faces, squirreling themselves back into the ocean depths. One, two, three, a dozen drop and crawl to the edge of the docks and disappear into the murky fluid. Another dozen, another. It's all too easy to make the Atlantians flee back to their home, so why is Cyke having such a rough time.

It's the second explosion that gives me cause to pause. Off to the left of the docks, far away from the battle of Black Beard and Ahab, the explosion rocks the foundation of the dock, firing up into the sky like a bird intent on prey. Mushrooming out, the ash and smoke filter down through night air like grey fireworks. The Atlanteans, unworried, look to the left, then to their King, and in singular fashion, they begin to retreat to the waters below.

Mystified by the Atlanteans, I don't heed the call of Imperius Rex and the punch to the head that knocks me cold.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the immense delay, but my computer broke down, and then there were some medical problems. I'm hoping to finish this soon so the story will be complete.
There's a lot of information to be had if one can be patient, which usually ain't my strong suit, but right now I don't have a choice.

The magnetic pulse running through the arm length cuffs prevents me from poppin' claws and getting out of this mess, and the same pulse running through the floor makes my movements slow and heavy. Whoever set this cage up tailor made it for me and my adamantium laced skeleton. Means they're smart, prepared. They knew what they were doing. And, they also knew how to contain me.

Then there's the darkness. Not completely dark, but dark enough to disorient and make one lose track of time. The only light coming in is a peep of a shaft creasing in through the metal bars atop the door. Air vents, basically. Which means, they don't want me dead. Yet, anyway. But, they also don't want me seeing anything, which makes me think that there's a lot to see.

I listen to a mix of muffled voices and the whir of motors and fan blades, the electric buzz of generators, and the soft beeps of computers. This place doesn't sound like some underwater prison. In fact, by the weight of the air, it feels the exact opposite. Pressurized, but thin, with the distinct scent of ozone flooding the top of the door. The atmosphere reminds me of the Blackbird flyin' high to avoid radar detection. That's when I realize that I have no idea what the fuck is going on.

Namor had us dead to rights – both me and Cyke – so why then am I in some magnetized cell on an airship and not in some cage at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean hoping some shark doesn't mistake my head for a taco? Why am I here, and not in some basement being puffed at with jellyfish gas if those damn mechs took me? If this were SHIELD, they'd have come got me by now, asked me their damn questions and let me go. If this were the Avengers, there's no way they'd have locked one of their card carrying members up to begin with. That ain't how Cap works.

So, what else can I glean? Ain't no footsteps right now, but I can hear the muttering. Two... no three people talking in a whisper. Something amusing, but not funny enough for a gut roll, just a snicker. By the way they scuffle about, I'd say they're on a long shift and it's coming to an end. Too many hours standing in one place and their feet begin to ache. Could mean, there's not a lot of staff. Three men, twelve hour shifts, so six guards in the hallway. Or, it could also mean that the staff is busy doing something else. Something deemed more important than guarding a magnetized cell that sure to keep me at bay.

Metal clangs metal as they shake with their quiet laughter, which makes me think of weapons. A few automatics, a grenade or two. If they're relying on weapons, that means they ain't mutants or otherwise endowed folks, which means that if this is Osborne, he ain't using his X-men or Avengers here. This is a personal vendetta, just like Summers thought. He'd pieced the puzzle together long before the rest of us, but that leaves a another question.

Did Osborne capture him, too?

Sometime after guard change, a meal is slid through the door slat, which gives me an excuse to get
closer, see if I can pick up more info. Apparently, the cafeteria leaves a lot to be desired, but that also means more than six guards and two pilots. As I scuff down some mystery meat and potato glop, I listen close for names, but the few they say I can't discern with clarity. Could be more minions, but could be family. They don't mention other prisoners, secret codes, or their plans for world domination, so in the end, I'm disheartened not only by the lack of intelligence, but also the meal.

The new guards don't talk as much as the old ones. Perhaps, they're new, not quite as friendly as the other three, or maybe they're bein' watched. “Jameson.” A woman's voice comes from down the hall, the first name I've heard clearly in the last several hours. Not that it does me any good. It's a common name, but in it's own way, that's a good sign. If this Jameson were worth his salt, I'd have heard of him by now.

Two sets of footsteps, one up the hall and one towards the door. I hear the new guard take his place to the right of my door, and then a long silence before the chatter begins. One guard talks of his wife and her pregnancy, how her pickle craving is so intense, he brought twelve jars home last night, and he's still worried that it won't be enough. This bit of chatter gives me two items of info.

The easy one is that it's daytime, so with any luck I've been in here for a little over a day. And the second, is that Jameson has some sort of authority over these imbeciles. Knowing who's in charge is always a good thing – take them out first, and the ants go scurrying in all directions.

It's not long after, the talk ventures into mortgages and neighborhood committees. The irony of it. Here these schmucks are taking orders from Norman fucking Osborne, and no one denies them the two car garage and white picket fence. Yet a mutant couldn't even get a fucking meal if it weren't for Cyke and all of his sleepless nights. If I could, I'd burn through these walls right now and rip those assholes to fucking shreds. Teach 'em what it is to fear the 198, and hope they choose a different path in their next lives. But, they knew I'd think that. That's why they locked me up in here.

Time passes before footsteps are heard and the chatter goes quiet again. Maybe an hour, maybe three. The silence signals the return of Jameson with at least five other guards in tow. Their steps are highly synchronized, and if it weren't for my heightened senses, I wouldn't be able to pick out the slight differences in heel clicks. These are trained guards, military style, which means even if I could pop my claws, getting out of here is going to be a lot more difficult than I thought. Despite their lazy talk of families and chores, these guys are probably trained to kill with extreme precision.

The soft beep of an electronic lock and the slight opening of the door floods light into my plain box of a cell. Six guns point in all directions, each one ready to shoot in case I make the slightest movement. Once clear, the other three heft a half beaten body into the cell and drop it unceremoniously on the floor.

Bloody, bruised and burned, Cyclops doesn't move an inch from where they dropped him. As the door shuts, he lays as still as death in the darkness, his breath barely lifting his chest. His visor is locked onto his face with a complicated series of chains and bands wrapped tightly around the back of his bleeding head, and the binds upon his hands seem even more of a tangle than those that would keep his eye blasts in check.

But, I don't worry. No. I recognize this posture. The slight coils of tension running up over his shoulders, the slight twitch of finger against his chest, the patterned breathing. He's waiting. Like a snake, he waits for the footsteps before he enacts his plan.

He sits with a struggle, the pain of his injuries coursing up and down his spine. With held breath he lets the pangs jangle downward away from his chest before daring a solid breath of relief. He looks at me. Though I can't see his eyes, I can feel his intent. Move closer. Move close enough that he can whisper, avoid the fury of the guards outside, and let me in on his secrets.
“My arm's broken,” he says quietly after waiting patiently for me to get my magnetized ass near enough that I can hear him. "So, I need you to dislocate my thumb.”

“Scott, I can barely move.”

“You can move more than I can. And Cyclops. We're still on mission.”

For long moments, I study the battered face. The cut cheek, the split lip, the swollen bruise hedging up from beneath his visor. The rest of him looks even worse. For every tear in his uniform, there's a wound to match – be it burn or puncture, broken bone or sprained muscle, the man's been shredded once again. “Sc-Cyclops --”

“Just do it, Logan. Trust me.” His voice displays none of the weariness that his wounds should allow. Clear, calm, confident, he has a plan, but he needs me to follow it.

In a jut of movement, I take his left thumb and dislocate it from the joint. A sharp, harsh inhale at the suddenness of my action. A part of me is unnerved that I could do this, another part is almost joyed at watching the pain filter down through normally silent muscles. For one moment, and one moment only, that steely facade is lost to something so human that it takes all my strength not to grab hold and kiss him until he begs for air.

But that moments passes all too quickly. As soon as the pain is managed, he concentrates ruby shielded eyes on the task before him. I watch as left hand swivels and squirms, drawing down into the cuffs. “Stupid magnets,” he curses under his breath and attempts to get better leverage by holding his hand under his knee. He pulls so hard, the binds scrape the skin red and raw. Small drops of blood pierce up through torn skin adding lubrication to the otherwise impossible problem. I wonder if he's smiling. If he did it on purpose. If it was all part of his plan to begin with.

It takes time, but Summers manages to pull his bloody hand free of the cuff. It falls to the floor with a metallic clang, and we both still in the darkness, waiting listening for any reaction from the guards outside. “You're clear, Cyke,” I tell him after some minutes of wait. “Wanna tell me what's going on?”

Without hesitation, he reaches into his boot, pulling out an object that glitters in the shafts of light flowing in from the outside hall. “You weren't supposed to be here, so now that you are, you're going to have to do the dirty work.” He hands me the diamond knife, as small as my fingertip and as sharp as a razor.

“What's that mean?”

“I need your help.” He taps gently at the plaster over his ribs. “You'll have to cut it, but I don't think they'll notice.”

Again, I ask him what's going on, but for a second time, he avoids the question. “There's an incision about three inches down. You'll have to break the plaster to get to it. Inside, there's a listening device. I need you to retrieve it and hide it on your person.”

“Hide it?”

“Very low tech. Should pass detection if they sweep us.” He notices my unwillingness to cut at something that's protecting him from harm. “Trust me,” he says in that solid oak voice of his. “Three inches down. They'll never notice.”

Patience as I drag the diamond knife across the plaster. He doesn't speak, doesn't breathe, doesn't do anything that might startle me or make me pause. When done, he takes the plaster and tucks it into
the lower end of the bandage, shrugging mildly at the ease in which he's hidden this clue. And, just as he said, the dark brown stitches of a fresh surgical scar sit three inches below. Within the skin, I can see a small bump, no bigger than a mosquito bite. He nods me on, and listens carefully to the renewed chatter outside.

With more care than I thought I could manage, I cut the thread that holds him together. One by one, the stitches pop and a four inch cut opens over his still bruised ribs. Scott cringes as I dig my thick fingers into the open wound. Twirling around the torn flesh and river of blood, I finally pull it free from his body. It looks like an earring. A simple silver stud of an earring, like the ones Bets wears in her off time. “I can swallow it.”

“Then all they'd hear is your stomach rumbling,” which is as close to humor as Summers ever gets. “It needs to be near your own ear, Logan, so they can hear what you hear.”

I can sense his reluctance to tell me his idea, but I piece it together anyway. The pain isn't bad— a quick cut down my jaw line with the diamond knife, then pulling the skin away until I can tuck the device just inside. In minutes, the wound heals, as if never cut to being with. “The knife, too. Otherwise, they'll know.”

I could imagine this knife, as sharp as it is, dangling from Betsy Braddock's neck, a sparkling jewel to entice the eyes of strangers. Their eyes would devour and ravish her from afar, never once thinking to touch the glimmering gem. “I messed up, didn't I?” I ask as I cut the flesh of my forearm.

A deep breath and measured words. “There's only one thing you need to remember, Logan.” His voice darkens with warning. “No matter what happens, whatever they do, don't tell them anything.”
Chapter Summary

Trust.

The room was so different now. All remnants of Jean removed. The little table replaced with an arm chair and reading lamp. The hints of green and yellow that accented her love of spring replaced with the pomposity of white and gold. The cute little pillows, some hand stitched with clever sayings about the beauty of life were tossed into a bag and placed in the closet. This room was no longer a place of welcome, of solace, of peace. And I hated her for it.

“Please, Logan,” Emma asked. Blue eyes rimmed with glass and worry. She blinked away the moment of invulnerability before I could comment. A part of me thought she was playing me, using that little tearful act to get me to do her bidding. After all, here was a woman that shamelessly toyed with a traumatized man so she could get revenge on his wife. What was to stop her from toying with me now?

“She's a grown man, doll face,” I growled before turning to leave. “He'll get over it. Just like we all will.”

Just inches from the door, she grabbed my elbow and tried to pull me back. “You don't understand,” she begged, wrapping herself around me hoping to pull at my heartstrings a little more. “He thinks it's his fault.”

My laughter reflected the betrayal that I felt, dark and seething, like good poison tipped on the edge of an arrow. “Of course, he does, sweetheart. You're talking about Scott Summers. Didn't you do your research before you paraded your pretty little ass into his life and ripped it apart?” Bang, right for the heart. Her beautiful faces crumbled down into a cliff of pure horror. She flickered diamond right before my eyes, in and out as the landslide of my bitter pill continued to cascade through her thoughts.

But, this was the White Queen, and though pained by my words, she would not be undone by some petty commoner. A diamond fist slammed the breath from my chest and forced me into the wall. Facet after facet of her perfect face creased with anger and vehemence, ready to rip my head from my neck and have done with me. “Now you listen here, you little worm,” she spoke in perfect chimes of violence and temper, “I don't care what you think about me, but you will not speak of him in such a manner. He's a good man, and right now, he's blaming himself for the death of 42 children. He's been in that Danger Room for three days trying to figure out where he went wrong. He doesn't deserve that.”

I watched in silence as cold hard carbon melted into the soft, pink flesh of Emma Frost. Her eyes still cold and daring from my earlier brush-off, she keeps her face as still as she possibly can, save for the crystalline drops that roll down her cheeks. “There was no way he could have saved them, Logan, but he will continue to punish himself until he finds the one way in a million that they would have survived.”

I shrugged her off with a stubborn chuckle. I'd known Summers for years. Breakdowns were as common to him as morning coffee, for all the good they did him. I had no doubt that he'd be back on
his feet as soon as he was done with his self-imposed guilt trip. “Oh yeah? And what would that one in a million way be, Emma?”

She took a deep breath, stilled the soft shiver of her jaw. “Last night at eleven pm, he discovered that if he'd allowed himself to die in some freak chance of statistics, that three of those students would have survived. He's been trying to up the numbers ever since.”

I remembered those days after Apocalypse was finally driven from his mind. Rash, calculated, obsessive, he would wander the grounds of the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning speaking barely a word to anyone, his sole focus on the mission at hand. His once even temperament had become extreme to the point of severe worry for the X-men. Darker, a bit more controlling, and though Jean and Xavier had managed to pull most of Apocalypse's filth from his head, remnants of the villain's hold on him remained. So, it made sense that his perennial penchant for guilt and self blame would lead to a new, more dangerous inclination for self-sacrifice, especially in the wake of Jean's death and the entire mutant race nearly being wiped off the map.

With a sigh, I nodded. “What do you want me to do, Emma?”

Head bowed, she shook her and shrugged. “Talk to him. I think right now, you're the only one he'll listen to.”

There is a moment in the darkness where we touch. Be it the cold or the worry, or something that I hope is more, Scott moves in next to me, puts his head on my shoulder, twines his free hand within my hair, and again, tells me to trust him. His voice is soft, near slurred with exhaustion and loss of blood, but there's also hope in those words. Hope that I will listen. Hope that we'll make it through this.

His breath is a warm breeze against my pulse. A gentle pattern of cool inhales and warm exhales. His visor and the chains locked so tightly around his head provide a cold, stark contrast to the warmth of his skin. “Scott, how bad are they going to hurt you?”

A long silence as he weighs his word. He strokes the line of my jaw absently. His breath starts and stops, halts with his tongue on the tip of his teeth, before he finally inhales once again. “Please, trust me this time, Wolverine.” He pauses. Ruby gaze finds me in the dark. “And, Cyclops. We're still on mission. I don't want to have to remind you again.”

I want to, but as the night wears on, I can feel the weight of his askance. Sure, Scotty can take a bullet and not say a word in complaint, but he ain't invulnerable. He's as easy to kill as those slops standing outside the doorway, same flesh, same bones, same blood. Without knowing what's going on in that scheming head of his, trust becomes more difficult by the second.

He notices the sounds before I do. Inching himself back from the half embrace, he quickly locks the cuff around his wrist and turns to the side away from me. “Trust me, Logan,” he reminds me a final time just as the door swings open. Guns first, then three men grip Cyke’s binds twice and drag him from the room.
LI

Chapter Summary

Of sleep and paradise.

I can feel my thoughts become frenzied and more simplistic at the same time. Instinctual. I’m hungry. I'm cold. I'm sore. I'm angry. I want to rage, to fall beneath the safety of the beast, to let him rip and tear and shred until I'm free of this cell. I want to rampage. I want blood and my hands. I want to wear the smell of death upon my shoulders like a cape, so long, so final. I have to concentrate, remind myself of the promise that I made – that I will say nothing, that I will trust. As hard as it is, that reminder is all I have left to hold onto in this darkness.

It's been at least twelve hours since they took Summers away. Twelve long, anguished hours. At times, I hear voices, soft little utterances of wagers and pools. They bet on time, on pain, on methods. “He won't last another hour,” one guard bets.

“Think they'll use knives or flames?”

“Flames, I hope. Motherfucker needs to burn for threatening the world like he does. His whole fucking island does.”

I choked the anger down far into the pit of my stomach, take back control of my blood, my mind. I can't lose it right now, not yet, not until Slim is safe. Go berserk on them, and they might decide to just kill him, and then go after the rest of us. As of now, they're still after something. I'm not sure what they want, but if they're torturing him, that means they must be pretty desperate.

Hours pass and the conversation outside my door goes as quiet as a leaf falling. In the distance, I hear the click steps of Jameson and six other guards, marching in time to a silent rhythm. As he nears, I smell an iron taint in the air. At first, I think of bullets, or guns, machine oil, or chemicals. But then I remember the ozone, how fresh it smells, and begin to filter that out of the scent. As he nears my door, the iron taint becomes stronger, a deep, earthy scent that drives the predator into a sick, sordid frenzy.

“Blood.” I whisper unconsciously, and my heart stops, falls into the stiff muscles of my legs before pounding against it's bony cage. Scott's blood.

The animal in me begins to struggle against the magnetized cuffs, stretching and tearing at muscles in order to free myself. With all my strength, I kick and chew at my binds, attempt to overpower the magnets wreaking havoc on my skeleton, kick and pull, squirm and push. A click in the machinery, and the magnets hit overload, forcing my body flat against the floor with a thud. I lay there immobile for more seconds than I'm able to count. In a fury, feeling the blood boil within my veins as the scent of Scott's life force peels through the ozone heavy air, I hear the door open and the metallic sounds of six rifles releasing their safeties.

“Doesn't he have a healing factor?”

“Yes, but if we dose him hard enough, it'll keep him stationary during transport.”
“How do we know if the dose is big enough?”

“This is enough propofol to keep an elephant under for a week.”

“And, how long for him?”

“Hopefully long enough to get him down the hall.”

I feel the needle poke its tiny hole into my skin and the burn of chemicals that my system immediately attempts to fight. But, there's more chemical than antibody, and as the propofol floods my veins, the lull of sleep becomes too hard to fight.

My world fades to black.

Thick forests and snowy mountains pillow up into hushed blue sky. The distant silver of ocean waves and the nearby trickle of a river down the mountain. The rough canvas of a meager tent and the smell of smoke and firewood.

I can hear him laugh from so short a distance. Happy, for once, and smiling, he pours the hot water into mugs and inhales the scent of fresh brewed coffee. “We should go fishing,” he says.

I finish scraping the hide of flesh before stretching it taut between two poles. The freeze will steal the moisture from the skin, pulling it up to the surface, then a few days by the fire, and the fur will be ready. I don't hear his footsteps across the rock and snow until he's already upon me. Smooth fingers rifle through the thick fur and he nods appreciatively at my handiwork. With a glimmer of a smile, he hands me the coffee, his deep brown eyes searching me for thoughts. “I'm fine, Scott,” I tell him.

“Of course you are. You're always fine.”

“You're one to talk.”

He laughs generously, nearly spilling his coffee in the process. “We should go fishing,” he repeats, his oaken so voice so foreign, so relaxed. His eyes follow my hands as I bring the coffee to my lips, and watches silently as I avoid his warm gaze. The soft, one-sided grin and the little cusp of a sigh, he knows what I'm thinking. He knows that I think something isn't right. But, he's too good a man to force the issue, instead, he allows me time. “The salmon are spawning right now, and salmon sounds good.”

“What? You're tired of bear?” I follow in his footsteps back to the fire where he offers me a breakfast of stewed bear meat and potatoes. If we had salt, this would be one of his better dishes, but we don't, so it isn't. It's still edible, and I wolf it down with ease. “I don't think we have any line left.”

He smiles once again – that bright, beautiful smile that spreads across his face like sunrise after a rainstorm. Hopeful, optimistic, so unlike the man that I've come to know. He's free here. Not responsible for the X-men, for Utopia, for the entire mutant race. He's relaxed, happy, almost charming. “We don't need line to fish, Logan,” he says and holds up two nets fashioned out of old twine and pine branches.

“This is what you were working on last night?” He nods. “Would rather you have come to bed.” His soft laughter is like medicine for a long life spent searching. To hear it makes me feel loved, wanted, even needed. “You really want to go fishing?”

“We can smoke what we don't eat tonight.”

“What about the bear?”
He points to a small igloo made of snow and ice. “Trust me, it'll keep.”

An hour later, we're walking the winding path down the mountain and to the small winter river that feeds into wider ocean some hundreds of yards away. Half iced over, it glitters in the still morning sun, casting prisms across barely bared skin and cold-shook hands. Scott sits at the edge of the bank and watches the crystal clear water eke it's way under the patchwork ice and frost. “I saw them yesterday,” he says. “Dozens of them hopping through the water.”

“Still a little early for 'em, probably.” I take my seat next to him and wrap my arms around his shoulder. “You're cold, hon.”

“I'm fine.”

I shake my head. “It's okay to ask me for help.” Summers says nothing, just continues to watch the water. I pull him as close to my chest, rubbing his arm to keep him warm. He nuzzles my neck in response. “If you get naked, remember, I'm a foot shorter than you. There's only so much I can keep warm, and I'd probably start with the bottom half.”

His shoulders shake with a voiceless chuckle. “I'm glad you brought me here.”

“So am I.”

About an hour in, the fish start their remarkable journey to the breeding grounds. One, five, a dozen. Scott was right. In a matter of minutes, there are hundreds of fish hopping down the stream in hopes of surviving their treacherous trek. On his knees, Summers dips his homemade net into the water, but the fish are trailing just three inches outside of his reach. Peeling himself away from me, he touches his boot carefully upon the ice.

“Careful, Scott,” I warn him, “Ice probably ain't thick enough for your weight.” But he doesn't heed my warning. His testing proves fortuitous. The ice doesn't break, so carefully, he tests with both feet. When that proves viable, he kneels down upon the ice and reaches into the salmon stream.

Six fish in a matter of seconds. In a scramble, he crawls back to shore and empties his net onto the snowy ground. His face alight with sheer joy, he tells me to take care of them as he's going back for more. Another dip, and another five fish brought to shore. “Scott, that ice ain't gonna get stronger, you know.”

“We need the food reserves, Logan,” he explains. “If we plan on making a life here, we need supplies. I'm not like you. I can't live on air.” Intent, he returns to the stream, balancing himself between reach and the shore of ice. Another three, seven, four. With each return, his smile only gets bigger, brighter, and more relieved. “Just a few more,” he says. “Between that and the bear, we'll have food for the month.”

It's then I realize how far out on the ice that he's actually going. How clear the ice is, how thin. There's a distance between us now, an ocean wide distance as he leans out to catch a few more fish to make food for the month. On hand and knees, he reaches as far as he can into the wealth of jumping salmon, putting all of his weight onto that clear, wet edge. I stare down around me at slit necks of fish and bloody snow. So many them. A hill. A mountain. So many that I can no longer see him.

It's the cracking I hear first. I scatter through the mountain of fish, throw those little corpses from here to camp just in time to gain view of the ice giving way and Scott falling silently into the frigid water.

“I will blow San Francisco sky high if you don't start talking, boy!”
The cold wraps around my body, fastens through flesh into bones as I try to run to him. I slip on the flesh of fresh caught fish, slip and fall as the undercurrent drags him under the rippled surface of the half frozen river. Pulls him under and spits him out just long enough to grab air before culling him back underneath again. Long fingers reach in desperation as I claw my way to the shoreline.

The ice breaks again, and he seizes up in pain as the air is forced from his lungs by raging riptide. I can see the pain of freezing limbs upon his face, the sharp creases of brow, the lips spread across grit tight jaw. Head back he steals himself from screaming, and plunges once again underneath the torrent.

“How did you know where the bomb was?” Jameson hisses into the breath-still silence, “And, don't tell me again that it was a fucking lucky guess.”

I reach for him, midst the ice and water. His tinted blue fingers just inches away from me, he tries to swim forward, tries to meet my grasp, but fails. Pulled under again, the current pushes him under a shield of ice. Claws popped, I begin to bash and slash at the invisible wall between us. I yell his name, over and over again. Painful pleas of desperation as I watch his eyes begin to lose that sunlight of hope. He pounds against the ice, trapped within the water, pounds and pound and pounds until fingers are bloody and his breath finally gives way. “Scott! Don't you dare! Don't you dare!” I yell and continue my frenzy. I watch his eye lull back into his skull, his fists slow, his face drone into dreamless darkness. I yell for him again. I curse at him, call him names, tell him how much I need him, but nothing I do matters. He's gone, and nothing I do will bring him back.

“Wake him up,” Jameson orders, and I feel the sharp pang of heartache in my chest.
Chapter Summary

And thus it begins.

Chapter Notes

When will it end?!??!

Captain Hunt Jameson smells like cough drops and old leather. Grayed at the temples, his eyes a near shade of charcoal, he watches with intent as medical technicians hook Cyke up to more than a dozen machines. Brain waves, heartbeat, pulse, blood pressure, and all manner of monitors blip and bleep to life as veins and skin are poked and prodded with needles and med pads.

Both hands and both feet swollen with broken bones and torn muscles, Summers sits silently under threat of bullet, his ruby gaze centered across the room and to my right. Jameson watches him for some time, his gaze both determined and furious. He's used to people breaking much easier than this. He's used to bawling and begging, shameful apologies for words that should have remained unuttered. This is wholly new to him. “How long until the reformulation is ready?” he asks a young woman standing in the doorway.

“I thought you didn't like the gas, sir?” Dressed in lab coat and low heels, she stands arms crossed, a mere observer to the spectacle of torture.

“I don't. Puts men like me out of a job.” He watches patiently as she leaves the room, phone in hand. Thin lips half pinched, he considers the man before him carefully. Usually, a few dozen broken bones would leave a man squealing everything but his mother's name, and a few dozen more, would have him yelling that, too. But he's never tortured an X-man before. We don't give up so easily.

Gray eyes finally turn towards me. “I can end your pain,” he says quietly, his fingers tucking at the thick cables sewn through my skin. Magnetized to a steel column, I can barely move my head enough to look him in the eyes as he speaks. “Hell, I'm in a charitable mood. I could even let you go back to that little island of yours free and clear. Who's he working with? How did he know where the bomb was?”

Silence is easy when I've got a half ton magnet polarizing me to a big piece of steel. The pain of stretched muscles, and the cables digging through my skin give me something powerful to focus on. That kind of hurt, if I let it, makes words insensible, unintelligible, and unimportant.

The clack-clack-clack of low heels in the hallways, and Jameson's attention skews away from me. The woman's own attention, however, is on the wealth of machines the two men putting them together. “You know when he gets here, he's going to laugh at your setup.”

“So, he's coming?” Jameson asks, mildly amused.
A reluctant nod. “They both are.”

“Shit.”

Calming her nerves, she polishes her lenses between the folds of thick cotton material. Dark eyes measure themselves with hidden warning. Slightly raised brow, rounded shape, she peers at him through errant bangs. “They want to know why the gas didn't work.”

Jameson mulls her words carefully. Hands clasped behind his back, I can see his fingers thread in and out of fists and holds. As thoughts come to fruition, so does his nerves banging themselves out into balled up fists stuffed in his pockets. His voice, however, the husk of it that remains from too many years of yelling, stays as smooth as can be. “They think I'm the mole.”

She doesn't answer, doesn't look up, simply keeps her focus on her glasses. She fogs a lens with warm breath and rubs at it with her lab coat. “Damn it, Chels,” he barks, “Just tell me what they said?”

“You're a mutant—”

“I'm not a mutant,” he's quick to interject. “I was an experiment.”

She sighs. “I'm not the bad guy here, Hunt. Let me finish.” A deep breath, he nods. “Your ability to induce notions in people's heads is a low level telepathic ability -”

“And he was raised by fucking Charles Xavier. Makes sense that he'd have some resistance—”

“Hunt, please,” she softens. “I'm just the messenger. Calm down.” Chelsea tips the glasses back onto her nose, and attempts a weak, sympathetic smile. “The gas should have amplified your ability to induce those notions, even without the pain. He should have been revealing the secrets of the universe with as many times as you dosed him.”

Gray eyes once again consider Cyclops and his silence. He lingers on the many scars across his arms and chest, the healed gashes and laser burns, the remnants of dagger wounds and bullet holes. “He's a soldier, Chels. Harder to slip a notion in when they're used to used to pain.”

“If you can get a confession out of him before they get here, then it won't be a problem.” Her words are near tender, heartfelt as she looks at Jameson.

She knows that inspiration will strike him soon. She's pushed all the right buttons, said all the right words. With delight in her dark brown eyes, she watches as he ponders his charge. The map of scars, the stoic silence. A slow snake of a smile slips across his cheek, and her face brightens with delighted cruelty. In a voice quieted by cool, calm rage, he gravels out a simple command. “Bring me the vise grip. And a hammer.”
Chapter Summary

An unexpected foe.

It takes 742 pounds of force to break the human rib, and 899 pounds to break the human femur. The human arm falls somewhere in between, depending on the bone, where the force is applied, diet, and exercise. But, Jameson's got his methods to break them with ease. A vise grip, hammer, and chisel, and the man breaks Cyclops' radius in four places with minimal effort.

But Slim doesn't scream, doesn't yell. Doesn't say a damn word, which only pisses Hunt Jameson off even more. “Who's the leak?” he says again in that brick-pitched voice, deep and dark, and scratched with urgency. He's got three hours to get his confession, and he ain't even close.

When Summers steeled up jaw doesn't open, Jameson moves onto the ulna. The sickening crack of bone sounds out over the rhythmic pulse of computers and magnet, exposing the rapid lilt of heartbeat and the cacophony of brain waves as Slim struggles to get the pain under control. “Who are you working with?” Jameson demands once again before driving the chisel into flesh and muscle and cracking the bone yet again. His face dripped with beads of sweat, Cyke jolts at the break, but his words remain locked between bit tongue and trap tight jaw.

A nod to the left and the guards scurry to wipe the dripping blood from floor and machine. Jameson watches the monitors, waits for Scott's heart to stop it's erratic pattern of start and stop, before breaking the same bone again. “I can apply pressure to the humerus eight times before the bone shatters,” he warns. “You'll never use this arm again once I'm finished.”

He looks at me then, his light charcoal eyes hooded by gray brown brow. I can see the thoughts roll against his jaw, the way the muscles tighten and release. Cyke's words roll over and over in my head, that askance of trust, and, for now, I intend to keep my word. He can recover from a broken arm, even a shattered one. He's done it before. So long as his heart can take the pain, I ain't worried. Jameson reads me just as clearly as I do him. He knows I ain't talking, so he breaks the bone in response.

Bone after bone breaks and shatters. Arms, legs, ribs, hips, knees, collar bone. Again and again, Jameson pounds the chisel into flesh and snaps the bones into pieces. “You're spine's just around the corner, Cyclops,” his nightmare words provoke almost no reaction. Too exhausted from hours of torture, and his body a wreck of immobile broken bones, he doesn't even flinch as the chisel breaks flesh over the sternum. The loud crack pings off walls and sends his heartbeat into such a fury that it stops completely and doesn't restart.

“Hit him,” Jameson orders. A vial of adrenaline jabbed into his chest and the heart begins its jangled pulse of starts and stops until it finally settles into a lightning paced rhythm. Leaning back in his chair, he wipes the blood from chin and cheeks and takes a deep breath of frustration.

“This is what I paid for?” a voice calls from the doorway. Norman Osborne glares at the wreck of a body in the chair. The guards quickly grab rags to clean the pools of blood from the floor, each taking turns to carefully glance at their most recent employer. All arrogance and grease, with one hand in the pocket of his loose beige slacks, he inspects the damage to his prisoner. “You didn't
break his jaw, did you?” Jameson shakes his head.

“Good idea,” he says gesturing towards me. “Never thought to sew him into the damn magnet like that. I'll make a note of it for the future.”

Tension stiffens the ozone-laden air as the two men lock eyes. “I take it he still didn't talk?”

“He's accustomed to pain, sir, and I can't induce him.”

“Can't or won't?”

The whole world knows the kind of treachery Osborne's capable of. His deviousness is renowned, especially once he raised HAMMER from the ground and started parading his military capability around. And, Jameson, as Osborne's prime torturer, knows more intimately than most the lengths that he's willing to go to. “Can't, sir,” he answers with shaken breath. His fear smells like cooking meat, a dangerous scent to those who would chase after him.

A long silence then, as Osborne scans the various readouts and the pile of bloody rags in the corner. He traipses across the room, his eyes glancing over the ingenious of my magnetized prison. An over, under cross-stitch, the metallic cable cords laced through arms, legs, and ribs, around the bones, before being welded in tight, well knotted loops. A fail safe should the magnet fail. In order to free myself, I'd have to rip off half my flesh in order to escape. “If you are the mole, Jameson, I may just let you live for the sheer genius of this. May,” he repeats for clarity.

Turning his attention back to Scott, he listens idly to the machines and watches as they roll out their stats of tension and heightened blood pressure. Finger in the air, he counts the chisel marks that decorate the man's body, and though he makes it through arms and legs, he loses track once he hits the chest. “No one's this stubborn, Hunt. You realize that, right? You broke his fucking hip in seven places. Tongues go loose for far less.”

Jameson watches Chelsea in the outer hall. Arm in the air with exasperation, she expresses her aggravation with the voice on the other end of the phone. With a deep sigh, she slides the phone into the wide pocket of her lab coat before clapping her hands and snapping her fingers. In seconds, the hallways is flooded with a dozen white-coated techs racing down the corridor and out of sight. “I'll get him to talk,” he finally says at last.

“No,” Osborne sighs, “No, you won't. We've decided to take other measures to procure the facts that we need.”

“Hank McCoy will kill him, Norman.” My heart comes to a stuttering stop at the mention of the bouncing blue behemoth. “You said you wanted him alive.”

My sudden struggle is met with six pistols drawn from lab coat pockets and pointed at the head of Scott Summers. Unable to move, he endures the pressure of cold cast steel upon his temple, between eyes, against his still rapid heart without a sound. Where he looks, I can't tell, but what he wants, I can figure that out with ease. He wants trust. More trust than I think I have.

“Well, that's interesting,” Osborne remarks. Head tilted slightly to the right, he regards the fresh tears of skin and muscle, the trails of blood that the techs attempt to clean up before they hit the floor. “Did you try gassing that one?”

“He got hit at the storage facility. His healing factor eats it up before it can take effect.” Chelsea stands in the door way, her dark rimmed glasses perched on the edge of her nose. Norman regards her words with some interest before twirling his fingers in a gesture of get-on-with-it. A snap of her
fingers, and her flood of techs work to dismantle the various gadgets that Scott's connected to. Without a care for the pain, they pull needles from his veins, med pads from his chest. She rolls him up and onto his side and fastens loose belts across his waist and shoulders.

“You know he can't move, right?” Jameson quiets into the ruckus.

“A precaution,” Chelsea answers with a shrug. “In case you missed something.”

The comment boils anger to Jameson's face, makes him red and violent, but he knows to cool his heels. Screeching the chair to the far side of the room, he takes a seat and watches as his work goes down the tubes. “He wants to know if you're going to watch?” she asks Osborne.

For long moments, there is no answer. Osborne is devious, sure, but he ain't a sucker for blood. Hence the rags, hence the hired help. He'd rather not get his hands dirty. “I want to see the results of the reformulation, after that, he's free to get the information as he sees fit.”

“Yes, sir.” A curt nod, and Chelsea continue to clean the equipment out of the room.

In the ensuing silence, the tension percolates into the scent of charred bone and sweet tea. I can't tell who's fight or flight it is at first, but as time ticks on, the scent only intensifies. As much as logic would dictate that it's Jameson who wants to run, he's as cool as Connecticut, and twice as patient. He's confident that the testing will see him free and clear of these charges. That's when my eyes settle upon Osborne, and the sweat sheen that licks down his jaw line, the way his fingers twitch in tandem. He looks at the door, then his watch, nervous and unsettled by the wait.

I've known Henry McCoy a long time, and we've had our ups and downs. But not only is this walk on the wild side far outside of his character, that he could make a man like Osborne this nervous is beyond me. If anything, Beast would inspire comfort with his presence, which can only mean one thing. They're not waiting on my Hank McCoy, they're waiting on the other one.

“Anthony Horowitz from the book Crocodile Tears,” a voice booms from just outside the room. “You cannot defeat your enemies until you know who they are. A paraphrase of Sun Tzu, if you will, a book you've apparently never read, Mr. Jameson.” Blue black fur and a fanged smile, Dark Beast – the Apocalyptic twin of the X-men's very own – leads a parade of harried techs into the room.

Each scented with the miasma of fear, they scatter and scurry across dozens of pieces of equipment, plugging, hooking up, and configuring readouts for their monstrous master. IV's filled with viscous dark liquid are jammed into Cyke's arms and legs, the pulse of heart, and just above his stomach. Medpads are glued to his head and heart, his wrists and back of knees. These then are connected to machines that measure his pulse and other life signs with a constant chime of stress. Into the soles of his feet, another IV, this one clear like saline, but thick and jelly like, and two more into the palms of his broken hands with a slight tinge of red. Scott cringes at the intrusions, the disruption and displacement of battered bones and chiseled wounds. He takes deep breaths, in through his mouth and out through nose in an attempt to control the signals shooting fire through his nerves.

I can smell the chemicals from here. Acidic and vile, tainted with harsh proteins and magnesium, the iron taint of blood, and the acrimonious scent of crushed pills and nerve enhancers. Chelsea, herself, triple checks the set up, leading each wire back to its host machine, squeezing IV bags to make sure the drip is sufficient, and double checking the belts that keep Cyclops from rolling back onto his spine.

“You failed, Jameson,” Dark Beast continues, “not because of your notions, but because you lacked knowledge of who this man actually is.” He pauses as he checks the readout, and holds out one blue-
black furred hand. “Scalpel.”

“Whoa, hold on,” Osborne interrupts to the surprise of Beast's black gaze. “I don't want him killed until I get my answers.”

“Oh, sweet Norman,” his deep, dark voice issues back. With steady hand, he makes the first cut along the length of Cyclops' spine. “I told you before. I don't want to kill him either. I want to destroy him.”

His movements are purposeful, intent. Small slices of scalpel, followed by the peeling of skin. As his work progresses, Chelsea's eyes widen, but neither Osborne nor Jameson venture forth to get a better view. Content to have his innocence proven, Hunt leans back in his chair with his legs crossed, having long ago lost his humanity to his profession. Osborne, on the other hand, stays his feet for queasiness. As blood pools beneath the table, he snaps his fingers for his techs to begin the clean up before the job is even done.

“What is that?” Chelsea asks in wonder.

Stretching a series of wires and microchips over Cyke's shoulder, Beast smiles. “A psionic inhibitor, surgically structured to his spine is my guess. And,” he begins as he digs further into the neck, “not removable, lest we want to die.” The blue-black monster relishes the attention he holds. “A nannite bomb,” he finally explains, “grafted just to the base of the skull. Any attempts to remove that or the inhibitor, and our cells will be flooded with those microscopic robots, which will then eat us from the inside out. Well played, Mr. Summers. Well played.”

“Great,” Norman snaps, “So, what do we do now? If we've got a leak, then--”

“As I said, Ozzie,” Beast interrupts, “know your enemy. And I know my enemy. Very, very, very well.”
Chapter Summary

A change in tactic.

Hunt Jameson watches me closely as Dark Beast explains the origins of the fish hook shaped scar under Scotty's chin. The way she held him down as she drilled the coat hanger into the soft flesh underneath and through his lower jaw just under the teeth. He revels in the hours she spent suspending him from the ceiling as he choked and gurgled on blood and air, how she would punish him if he dared attempt protest of her actions. Again and again, she would drop him from the height, inflict her fury, then drag him back up to the ceiling and hang him there like an ornament as she waited for his will to break.

“What's worse though,” Beast explains as he drives the coat hanger through the fresh drilled holes in Slim's mouth, “is that they could have stopped her far earlier.” Though twisted by apocalyptic darkness, his voice seems almost gentle. “They waited four hours before intervening. They stood out in the hallway listening as she mutilated you, and did nothing for four whole hours. And all because Xavier and McCoy thought that you were strong enough to save the world. Oh, how wrong they were.”

Beast finishes looping the end of the hanger through Scott's mouth, and then lifts him up into the air. Broken limbs dangle uselessly as his side as he chokes on the rush of blood and struggles to breathe. “A knock at the door was all it took, and a reminder that she needed to keep the noise down because others were trying to sleep. Do you remember what Xavier said after she sauntered off in a pout?”

Breath falters as Cyclops is forced higher into the air. An attempt at coughing fails, as does a rasped harsh breath as blood starts to seep into his lungs. With a gnarled laugh, Beast lets go of the hanger, and Cyke's body pools up on the table unable to right itself. Blood reverses flow and streams out over the large metal table, and lungs begin working overtime to draw in breath. “He told you to get up off the floor and head to Med Bay, and when you did not respond, he left you there to think about your weaknesses.”

As Beast goes on, he explains how hours later, it was the real McCoy that gathered up Scott's tired body and carried him to Med Bay. How the gentle soul had worked tirelessly through the night to patch up the wounds left in the wake of Jean's bout of madness. How he'd worried and pined, bit his nails to nubs as he sewed shut the many holes left in his body. “You didn't even bother to thank him,” Beast's dark voice oozes into the heart held silence. “All of that work, all of that worry, and when you woke up in the morning, you didn't even bother to tell him that his work was appreciated. You called him your best friend, but in truth, you punished the man for something far outside of control. What did you expect him to do? Break down the door and take on the Phoenix himself? You're the one that agreed to the sacrifice, not Henry McCoy, yet you blamed him for your constant lack of strength.”

Jerking up on the hanger, Dark Beast pulls Cyclops close. Blue-black gaze meets ruby red, but this isn't an antler stare down challenge. This is pure domination, and the monster has won. “You've never appreciated anyone's genius but your own,” he breathes and pulls Scott up further. He listens for the sounds of gurgling blood and smiles, “I know you, Scott Summers, and you are no genius.
You're a fragment of a man who knows nothing of himself. No matter the dimension you're in, you treat others as tools, and nothing more. And, for that, I will destroy you."

“Not before we get the information that we need,” Jameson reminds the dark creature from the other side of the room. Unflinching gray eyes scan the cross hatch pains of young love, steeled to the horror by years of professionalism. With quiet steps, he joins Beast at the table, and snaps his fingers. Techs immediately appear with antiseptic and clean white cloths and begin to clean the wounds inflicted over the last day and a half. Her name upon his back, the shredded skin over ribs, the nails pounded into his feet. “You're no closer than I was,” his dryness hovers just above the fray.

Beast shrugs, unwilling to admit defeat, especially to such an inferior enemy. “He's more stubborn than I presumed,” he finally explains. “I thought he'd be begging for me to stop.”

“Well,” Jameson says with a strange glint in charcoal eyes, “You say these IV's will keep him alive no matter what we do to him?”

The monster nods. “As long as major organs stay intact, this system will stay the need for blood and other fluids, so theoretically, his body should keep working. And, to ensure his brain doesn't shut down the pain, I’ve added nerve enhancers to intensify the signals sent throughout his nervous system.”

“So, we could essentially cut out his tongue, and he'd survive it.” Jameson waits for the slow smile to creep across his new partner's face. “Then, maybe it ain't him that we need to make beg.”

My stomach drops as eyes turn towards me. With a toggle of switch, I can feel the slight drop in polarity that keeps me flat backed against the magnet. I find myself finally able to twitch my fingers and move my jaw – not enough to escape, but just enough to talk.

“I think it's time to do some real damage,” Jameson says, “And I get the feeling, that you know just where to start.”
Chapter Summary

Checkmate.

Chained to the wall, he willed his stomach not to churn as Jack Winters feasted on a meal of roast chicken and vegetables. It had been two days since he’d eaten, two long days, and his only hope laid in the fact that if he was good, if he behaved and sat quietly as he had been asked, the man would throw him a bone.

“You’re a greedy snot,” Winters finally spoke into the silence of the small shack in the middle of the woods. “Only time you behave is when you want something, you manipulative little asshole.” He tossed the boy a piece of potato, but it landed just inches outside of his reach. Scott struggled to reach further, his chains chiming with his effort. “Keep that up, kid, ’n you’ll put me in a bad mood.”

Immediately, Scott fell to the ground in hopes of silencing the chains, his ruby gaze focused on that small piece of potato lying on the floor. Ribs jutted out from stretched thin skin, wrist bones and ankle bones, the curve of his hips and length of his legs. Half starved and covered in bruises and burns, he looked no more than eight years old, though he had turned twelve some weeks ago.

He knew better than to react to the knock on the door. Knew better than to attempt to cover himself. In the first days, he’d done just that, hid himself with his chained up hands or crossed his legs to block the view, but that only made things worse in the long run, especially when guests arrived. So, he turned his thoughts back to the potato, wishing that thoughts alone would inch it closer to his hand.

As conversations floated in the background, the voices of Winters and two women, his focus found a line of tiny black ants marching towards the not-yet-forgotten morsel. Piece by piece, they carved the potato into microscopic sections, sending the food away in their quickly formed brigade. Crumb by crumb, they carried the food back to their nest, but for all their work, Scott couldn’t see a difference. The potato still looked the same as it had when it hit the floor, and he wondered how long it would take for them to devour the entire thing.

Her name was Candy. She smelled like bubblegum and too much makeup. “What is he, like five?” she barked. “What the hell, Jack, this isn’t--”

A thumb rolled the wad of cash in his hand. “Didn’t realize you’d gotten picky on me, Can-can. ’Sides he’s twelve.”

“So, what exactly are you asking us to do?” Marleen asked. Marleen was the boss of the operation, not quite a pimp, but she ruled the corner of 5th and Water Street, negotiating pay and tricks, and making sure her girls got home safe. Winters was renowned for making the girls uncomfortable, so she decided to check it out for herself this time.

“Nothing you would be ashamed of,” Winters laughed. “A little kiss here, a little foreplay there, some two-on-one action. Hell, I won’t even make you suck me off.”

Marleen got the idea pretty quick. “That’s what he’s for,” Winters smiled. “For that much cash,”
she said, pointing at the roll of bills tucked inside Winters' diamond hand, “There's gotta be something more to it.”

Winters patted her on the shoulder for her stroke of genius. “You live up to the tales, 'Leen,” he chuckled. “Of course there's more. I want the two of you to watch.”

“This isn't a normal request, Jack.” Marleen looked down at the beaten child at her feet, half nauseated from what they were being asked to do. “I don't --”

“This ain't a normal amount of money either, 'Leen.” He thumbed the roll of bills again just to prove his point. “Two thousand dollars. That's one thousand each for two hours at most. Imagine the kick you can buy with this?”

“Where'd you get it?” she asked, very wary of the proposition.

“Does it matter?”

In the end it didn't, at least not to Marleen. She'd been sober nearly a day now, and already, she could start to feel the shakes. A thousand bucks would keep her going at least until the end of the month. But, there was still the boy to consider, and she had a feeling that this wasn't the first time he'd put a group of working women into a position like this. Not trusting her own judgment, she called upon Candy to make the final decision. “You're call, Can-can.”

Candy's father was an abusive ass who beat the shit out of her and her mother on a nightly basis. At age 12, she'd finally had enough, packed her bags, and hitchhiked her way to the city where she first met Marleen. Marleen took her in, and swore that Candy would never be beaten again, unless she wanted to be. Candy, Marleen assured herself, would make the right call, know how to handle both Jack and the kid.

Jack had hired Candy before, and she knew well enough that if she turned down his request, that he'd just find someone else to fulfill it, and the girls he'd find often didn't know what they were getting into. Candy did, and she had a way of talking him down from some of his more violent urges. That's why she always volunteered herself when it came to Winters. She could handle it, most couldn't.

“Only if you feed him,” she said at last, her eyes glistening with tears at the sight of the starved little boy in front of her. “You feed him, we'll stay and watch.”

“Or, maybe you could feed him,” Jack said with a lick of lips. “Yeah, I might like to watch that.” He gripped Candy's chin with diamond hand, looking deep into her dark brown eyes. “Little momma and her cub. That sound enticing.”

It wasn't hard to make Jack Winters feel his oats. A little nip here, a little stroke there, and the guy was harder than his diamond hand. So as Candy spoon-fed the little boy on her lap, Marleen kissed and licked the guy into a frenzy. It was then he called for Scott.

His stomach bulging just slightly from finally being fed, Candy helped him into the living room, and set him down between Jack's legs. Behind his glasses, he looked up to the overly-made-up blonde above him. Her eyes near glass with tears, rounded with fear and sympathy, she motioned for him to get on with it. It would be easier on him that way; just do the deed and forget about it. She'd learned that much from her father. Fighting would get him nowhere, but the little boy was stubborn.

“You do this,” she knelt to whisper in his ear, “and I'll bring you a treat next time I happen this way.”

Underneath red glasses, tiny tears began to well. He looked at the hardened flesh between his
keeper's legs, then back to her and shook his head. Marleen took the cue to distract Winters from the conversation. “Come on, now,” Candy urged. “It’s easy. Trust me. Just put it in your mouth – that's all he wants. Just one little lick, and we'll do the rest.”

“If I have to force him again,” Jack grumbled, pulling himself away from Marleen's lips, “I'm only payin' you half.”

“Don’t worry,” Marleen smiled, dragging her hand down chest to pump the flagging member, “Can-can's got a tongue of gold. You let us worry about the boy, you just worry about the pleasure.”

Candy cupped the boy’s chin with all the care of a mother trying to protect her child. Scott succumbed to the gentleness of the touch, leaning into it as if feeling love for the first time in his life. A magenta smile swept across tobacco yellow teeth, cracking the layers of pale foundation and streaking black rivulets of mascara down her aging cheek. With her thumb, she traced the outline of bruised cheekbone and split lip, refusing at last to outright cradle the child in her arms. “You’re such a sweet thing, aren't you,” she whispered, gaining a slight smile for her kindness, “I need you trust me, little one. Okay? Just get on with it. It will hurt less, and I'll bring you a treat next time. A cupcake or something like that. Somethin' you'll like. Just give him something so that he'll leave you alone.”

Tears rolled down the child's cheeks, across sunless flesh and a thin layer of unwashed dirt. He shook his head so slightly, that had she not been holding him, she would have missed it. “Please,” she begged. Not for the money, but for him because she knew what Jack Winters was capable of. “Just a lick, that's all he needs.”

Scott considered the rock hard member before him. Standing straight, far too big for his tiny mouth, he swallowed in fear at once again being forced to taste the thing. With Candy's hand on the back of his head as a guide, he inched forward, his tongue at ready. Winters watched the boy, anticipating, moaning as the boy came closer and closer to fulfilling his desires. But at the last moment, Scott pulled away, unwilling to go through with it. “Fuck you,” Jack yelled and back-slapped the boy's cheek with his diamond hand.

Knocked to the other side of the room, his ears ringing from the hit, Scott lay motionless in his shock. “See how he does me!” the man yelled at the top of his lungs, “See what that greedy little ass does! I feed him, I keep him warm, and I get nothing in return!”

Scott barely made out the whimpers and pleas of Candy and Marleen. Barely heard them beg with words of “Stop.”, “Please don't do this.”, “Just calm down.”, “Jack, please, you're going too far.” In his daze, he didn't recognize anything for what it was until the sudden pain jolted him into agonizing wakefulness.

“The leg of the sofa,” Beast whispers in my ear, “That's what he used to sodomize little Scott Summers. A broken off chair leg. The girls were helpless to stop him as he rammed it into Scott's innards again and again, yelling and screaming at the child for his insolence.” He takes enough of a pause to watch as Jameson inserts a bit into the drill. “That drill will pierce Cyclops' ear drums. After we will remove his eyes, and then cut his vocal cords. If you don't tell us what we want to know by then, I will help Scott relive that fateful day when he had the leg of a sofa shoved up his ass, and then he will keep reliving it until we get the information that we need.”

“I don't know what bomb you're talking about,” I blurt out when I hear the buzz of drill.

“Wolverine!” Scott rasps, “Keep your mouth shut!”
Blue black brows raise with amusement. “Indeed.” A twirl of fingers, and Jameson lowers the drill.

I've only heard Scott scream like that one other time, when Jeannie sacrificed herself on the moon to pay for the sins of the Phoenix. I'd hoped to never hear it again.

In moments, it's over. Drill off, the techs belt Cyclops onto his other side so that Jameson can drill the other ear. On the small of his back, Jean's name runs red. Jameson takes his time, double and triple checking the binds in case some small part of One-eye is still able to move. He tugs at each of the binds that keep the visor on his head, makes sure that they won't slip when the drilling begins.

“Logan, Logan, Logan,” Beast sings his merry tune. “I'm not bluffing. Surely, you have come to realize that by now.”

“I don't know what bomb you're talking about.” A twitch of fingers, and the drill starts again. Too tired to scream, Scott sobs softly as the drill enters his ear. In seconds, he is deaf to the world. The techs flip him over so that he once again faces me. Beast takes two steps back and gives the all clear.

For the first time in a day, I'm released from my magnetized prison. With guns pointed towards Cyclops' head, and my cuffs still keeping claws from popping, the techs work to unhem me from the column. Between the wire snips and a dozen hands, I fall to the floor not twenty minutes later, my muscles so stiff and sore from the magnet and lack of movement that I can't even force myself to move.

I'm drug by the hair to a chair not five inches from Scott's face, his eyes directly centered upon my own. “Can your healing factor recover lost brain matter, I wonder,” Dark Beast muses as he pushes my face directly against Cyclops' visor. “Now, let's try this again,” he muses, “How did he know about the bomb?”

Even in deafness, Cyke is demanding. “Don't tell them anything.” His words earn a sharp jab to the throat which sends him into fit of catching his breath. Techs begin to unravel the extensive network of chains and ties that keep the ruby red visor in lock down upon Scott's head. It's then that they're brandished, a pair of rough hewn ruby quartz pliers. Shaved to a razor sliver at the tips, and wide enough to easily cover Slim's eye, I realize that Dark Beast's revenge has far outpaced Cyclops' ability to plan ahead.

The techs silently slip the visor away, leaving One-eye both deaf and blind. Truth be told, I'm thankful for this. I don't want him to see my betrayal. “We found a lot of bombs, McCoy. Which one are you asking about?”

Jameson's voice is both serious and even, like smooth whiskey over weather worn leather. “The one at the warehouse along the docks.”

I know what he's talking about, that 30 second mission that destroyed my chance for an afternoon nap. Slipped in, slipped out, and that was it. “Didn't see no bomb,” I reply. Jameson presses the ruby quartz pliers to Cyclops' eyelid, digging in enough with sharpened edges to bring the blood and a fearful hiss. Scott only creases his eyes further, afraid he'll open them on accident, afraid he'll blow my brain through the back of my skull. “I'm tellin' the truth. The whole place was empty.”

“I don't believe him,” Beast mutters, grabbing me by the hair and forcing me again to stare Cyke right in the eyes.

Jameson smiles. “Me neither.”

It takes roughly 45 seconds for Jameson to run those pliers up and under Slim's eyeball, covering the
whole damn thing in ruby quartz and snipping off his eyelid at the same time. And though those 45 seconds go quickly enough, the harsh, broken scream that escapes from Scott's heaving chest will last a lifetime.

“Please,” I beg, watching as the screaming settles into a tremble of shock and disappointment. “I'm telling you the truth. I didn't see a bomb.”

“The telepath was standing right beside it,” Jameson replies. “One more step back, and the whole place'd gone sky high.”

“Doesn't mean I saw it,” I plead. “Doesn't mean I saw anything. Bombs don't move. We couldn't see what didn't move.”

“Told you he knew about the gas,” Dark Beast utters into the sudden tension. They didn't care about the bomb, they simply wanted to know whether the gas worked. Whether their little parlor trick had worn off, or if something else was in the works. I then realize that the whole mole fiasco was a trick, that they knew Scott would never talk, and that I'd played right into their hands.

“What were the pennies for?” Beast continues, his deep bass boom more amused than stressed now that they'd loosened my tongue.

I know that mission, too – Tabs little stint that got her burnt to a crisp, but it's purpose mystifies me more now than it did then. “No idea,” I answer, and then answer again when the ruby red pliers come down upon Scott's other eye. “All I know is that she was told to put the pennies out, but I don't know why. We just followed orders. We didn't always know why.”

“I still say it was some coded message to Namor,” Jameson quips as he knicks the razor edge of pliers back and forth across Scott's eye.

The discussion turned to Namor, I tell them everything I know. Namor had long been unhappy with Scott's leadership, then after the docks, he turned on Utopia, threatened war, and Cyclops responded in kind. “Which was what we planned,” Beast reveals upon my closure. “We'd been trying to get them to war with each other for months.”

But Jameson thinks there's more to the story. He watched Cyke fight that night, noticed how far spread out the teams were while he took Namor on all alone. “And for a guy in his condition, he shouldn't have held out for as long as he did. Broken ribs, broken arm, no way he could've taken Namor like that, especially since he used his eye beams a grand total of one time. You and Osborne got set up. He wanted to be captured.”

Forty five seconds later, Cyclops loses his other eye, and another twenty after that, his voice as well. “You better start talking,” Beast warns, “or I will put the memories of Jack Winters on display for you.”
LVI

Chapter Summary

Best laid plans.

He didn't feel well. He hadn't felt well in days, but that didn't matter to the dozen or so bodies sandwiched around him, packed into the room like mismatched jigsaw pieces. Finally snoring away their drug hazed minds, he was thankful for finally being left alone. No one was touching him for the first time in many hours.

Though he was too exhausted to be hungry, the sharp pains in his stomach kept him awake. A sharp, rolling pain that jabbed upwards and out, climbing across nerves in his hips and made him grit his jaw. Something was wrong. Maybe they'd finally killed him. He didn't mind the thought of a slow death, just that death happened, took him out of this hell that he'd been immersed in for almost a year now. Wracked again, he tried to pull knees to chest, but his right leg wouldn't move. They'd broken it sometime during their party games, perhaps when the fat man took him from above and bent his legs flat to the floor. Or maybe it was when Jack hit him again, this time for throwing up the food they forced down his throat.

He didn't feel well. He hadn't in days. His skin ached from more than just the whip bites or chains. It ached from illness, and if he wasn't careful, the fever would take his thoughts, and he'd wake up once again with his mouth around someone as they beat the back of his head to wake him up. They'd pull out more of his hair, or pinch his already bruised body until he reacted to their whims.

In the kitchen, he could hear Jack Winters talking to a woman, whose voice he thought he recognized. Perhaps she was the one who sat on him early in the evening, and wouldn't let him breathe until he did what she said. He hadn't meant to be obstinate at the time. He learned many months ago that Candy was right, giving in meant less pain.

“Hurry,” a whisper screeched through the absent silence, the only intelligible sound midst the sleepers and dreamers left in the wake of Jack Winters' wild night. The night itself was a celebration of another successful bank robbery, courtesy of Scott's mutant power, and as he'd explained to Scott the night before, he had plans to make himself even more powerful, so the boy would never have to leave the little shack again.

The chains around his collar began to chink with movement. With no fight left in him, Scott pushed himself up off the floor and looked around at the naked bodies. “There he is.” Woozy, wanting nothing more than a night's rest and endless slumber, he finally spotted Candy and Marleen quietly tiptoeing through the maze of arms and legs and naked torsos. Knowing that they wouldn't hurt him, he laid back down and closed his eyes.

Scott told them no. As they popped the collar around his neck and lifted him from the ground, he told them no. They didn't know what Jack was capable of, that he could make them do things if he wanted. His voice too weak to be heard above the snoring, his body too sore to struggle, he begged for Candy to put him down. But, she ignored his soft, quiet sobs, continued her trek through the crush of naked bodies, and onward to the front door.
In her wake followed Marleen, her deep brown eyes wary and watchful. She would miss Jack’s money, but in the end, she couldn’t live with herself if the kid died, and according to Candy, he was close. Between the untreated fever he’d suffered the last few days, and what she was sure was internal bleeding considering the color of the bath water, the kid was going to keel unless they did something. Free and clear, they made their way through the small mud room at the front door, and for the first time in nearly a year, Scott felt something like hope awaken in his chest.

His heartbeat matched Candy’s crazed pulse as she reached for the doorknob. As her fingers turned the rusted steel, tears began to well under his glasses, and breath became harder to find. As the door creaked open to reveal the chilled midnight air outside, he lost his breath all together. His heart swelled. Just three more steps. Three more steps and it was over. Three more steps and – “Put him back.”

Hope broke.

“I said put him back!” Jack’s voice bellowed through the small shack in the woods, shaking dreamers awake, and Candy to her core. Eyes wide and vacant, as if under spell, Marleen grabbed hold of Scott's arms and lifted him from Candy's embrace. “Drag him if you have to,” Jack continued, his voice quieter now. “You follow, Can-can. Need to make sure he’s locked up real tight.”

The guests rubbed the sleep from their eyes and watched in wide eyed wonder as Marleen and Candy drug Scott back into the living room. Some cleared a path, frightened by the scene of the two women acting against their will. These guests had known the plan, knew that they were going to rescue the child. The ones that weren’t aware, stayed their place and watched with confusion. His telepathy on overdrive, Jack Winters strained to catch their thoughts, to weed out the conspirators and punish them accordingly.

“Go,” he said, pointing to a young woman with short black hair and a tattoo of an eagle upon her neck. Nodding, then bowing, she scoured the room for her clothes. “I said go!” he yelled just as she found her black leather jacket. Wrapping the sleeves around her waist to hide her nakedness, she ran through the room and disappeared out the front door. “Get the Ram,” he said, pointing at the fat man, one of his most ardent guests, and one who’d mentioned several times that he’d like to buy the boy. After several dry swallows, the fat man scrambled to his knees and searched the room for the missing sofa leg.

Winters continued to divide the guests into groups of go or stay. Those allowed to leave bowed politely and rushed to door. Those called upon to stay cowered against the back wall, their eyes as blank and vacant as Candy’s as she snapped the collar back around his neck.

Broken in so many ways, Scott didn’t even hiss when the fat man pushed the Ram back inside of him. With every thrust, blood began to weep, trickle down over wood and squish inside the fat man’s hand. With every push, the pain climbed up through his spine and collapsed over fevered thoughts. But the child knew better than to beg reprieve, knew better than to move or wince, or do anything that would show displeasure. He didn’t want to imagine the pain of disobedience. This was more than enough.

The screams came from nowhere, followed by the immense weight of the fat man laying on top of him. He could feel the wetness cascade down over his shoulders and chest, moisten his hair and drip into his eyes. “This is what happens when you cross the Living Diamond,” Winters' dark tone eeked into the sudden silence. Though Scott couldn’t see, he was sure that Winters was choosing his next victim.
“Please,” Candy begged. Scott watched tears fall to the floor, creating a drip drop pattern of tiny puddles around her knees, and swirl pretty patterns inside the fat man's life blood. Her sobs continued for years, or so it seemed to the child. So much fear hazed into the atmosphere. He imagined, in his fevered thoughts, that that fear would become a great gray cloud at the edge of a desert, hovering over an oasis filled with life. The rain would be all too brief, the tiny drops - though great in number - to weak to bring relief to the wildlife that craved the water. Dispirited, they would dig their holes once again, and pray for dreams to take them in their sleep.

She died quickly. Her blood pooling out from slit throat. Her eyes wide open and streaked with ruined mascara, and her fingertips just grazing his bruised cheek. She looked almost relieved in her death. All of her struggles, all of her ache, she looked finally at peace.

Scott knew his death would be far slower, but he hoped that his eyes reflected the same solace that she had been granted with her final breath.

The chair leg pounds against ruptured organs, spilling blood and bits of tissue onto the steel table. “I don't know!” I sob, not knowing how to convince them that Cyclops didn't tell me anything. “I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.”

He's been flayed. His skin ripped open to expose the mash of broken bones and crushed organs inside his ribs. His organs covered now in wires and rods meant to keep them pumping life throughout his body. Without the machines and the host of chemicals pumping through his brains, Scott would have died days ago. A part of me wishes that he had. “She's not in Hong Kong,” Jameson speaks, and with a snap of fingers, stays Dark Beast's avid intent to pound Slim's guts into nothingness. “We've checked. She's not there.”

“He sent her to Hong Kong. They had a big fight about it. If she's not there, then I don't know where she is.” Beast rears back on the Ram again, ready to thrust it forth with all of his strength. “Maybe she's with Namor.”

The statement quells the current round of torture. A snap of blue-black fingers, and the techs rush in to check the near empty IV's, changing them out with such speed that the monitors don't register the momentary disconnection of life from body.

“So, we're thinking that Namor and Frost set Cyclops up?” Osborne asks from his place behind the column. Too chicken shit to watch the torture, he sits with his chair facing the far wall, behind the previously magnetized column, so that even if he turns his head to listen to my pleas, he won't see a drop of blood.

“Unless he staged that, too,” Jameson argues. “Think about it, what better way to hide his true intentions than to stage a two front war so that we'd capture him. The man came equipped with a psionic inhibitor and a nannite bomb. He's after something.”

“For all the good that's done him,” Beast quips. A cruel smile lapses across fangs as he looks over the damage that he's wrought upon his most hated enemy. “He's not even a man anymore. Just a bag of bones and mush that will perish as soon as we unhook him from my machines.” To prove his point, he pulls the long rod from the center of Cyke's heart. Machines sound red in their haste to warn of impending death, and quell the very moment he pushes the metal rod back in place. “See?”

But Jameson remains unconvinced. “How much have actually learned from all this? Do we know why he sent doughnuts to two dozen active bomb sites? Do we we know why the kiosk bomb didn't go off the night of the dock attack? What about the pennies, or the fact that he mapped our entire tunnel network without even stepping a foot underground? And, when's the last time we heard from Porter?”
Osborne sighs. “Porter's fine. I've got him stationed at the docks in case Namor makes another move.”

“I say we blow the city. Set it on fire, dump these fuckers in the ocean. It's been three days, and we have shit to show for it. We cut our losses and move on.” Jameson crosses arms against chest and waits for backlash.

“But, I'm not done yet.” Claws pierce the half-flung flesh of peeled ribs before once again lighting upon the Ram. A deft shove and Cyclops' broken body moves with the momentum. Brows crease slightly over the dark caverns where his eyes used to be, proving the pain of crushed organs. Jaw broken two days ago, he can't grit through it, nor can he scream. His only option is to bear it and hope the creature's attention goes elsewhere. “I sucked up to my idiotic counterpart for months to get this information, just for this very occasion. I coddled him and wiped his poor little tears away as he drowned in the misery caused by this man. In every life, every dimension, he is a thorn in my side, and I plan to see this through. I will torture this man until even my machines refuse to sustain his life, and then I will find another way to keep him alive until his body breaks down into an oozing mess of rot and mold. Only then, will I be finished.”

A cough from the column. Osborne's nauseated voice peeps out in a quiet display of other plans. “Not to mention, we can't blow San Fran until we have the bombs placed on Utopia, which won't happen until tomorrow's food shipment. Once we get the bombs on the asteroid, you can barbecue them and eat them for breakfast for all I care, but I want that damn mutant island wiped off the face of the map. In the meantime,” he continues, crossing the room without daring to look at the mutilated body on the table, “see what else you can get out of the freak there. I'd like know what's up with that damn deli. I mean, the sandwiches are good, but not worth all the time they spent on that rooftop.”
The rhythmic pulse of stats etches out into the stillness. The machine measured breath, the induced pumping of his heart, the rumble in the deep of his stomach. I look upon that foreign face of his – the dark holes where his eyes used to be, the shattered jaw, the jagged edges where they removed his ears some hours ago – still bleeding, much like the rest of him. A criss-cross of wires and IV's keeps him alive and in desperate pain, which every so often shimmers across his brow, the one part of him still able to move. He doesn't even look real anymore. Pale, waxen. Gone is the steel of his jaw, the hard line of brow, the eyes hidden behind red lenses. There is no secret about him, no hope nor agitation. He just lays there, alive. That's all he is, alive.

The Ram now acts like a plug, keeping his insides from leaking out. Beast went too far, nearly destroying vital organs in his revenge fueled craze. Had it not been for Jameson's cool head, the Apocalyptic monster would have ruined a lifetime spent planning this vendetta. I want to gut Jameson for that, for stopping the Beast. Rip him from nose to tail, let his guts spill out in my very hands before wrapping them around his neck and hanging him from a high building as the life pours out of him. But, like Cyclops, I'm unable to move. The magnet keeps me stationary, strong enough to hold bones, but weak enough so that I can talk. Talking hurts. Pulls my skull apart every time I do it, but my healing factor patches me back up, so that I can talk some more. And talk I do, without regret now, without worry or fear. Talk until my jaw's so bent out of shape that they have to wait an hour until my mouth's stitched back up before they can continue to play the horror out on Scott's mutilated body. I tell them of the early years, before Cyke married Madelyne, before he lost his son. I tell them times when Jean became close, too close for Cyclops' comfort. I tell them of Sinister, of Magneto, of Apocalypse. Ever minor detail I can think of I spill, if only to stop the horror for a minute. I'm thankful for that reprieve. Every time. I'd rip my jaw off completely if I could. Rip it off again and again if it could buy Scott a few moments of peace.

Scott killed Jack Winters. Under the direction of Xavier, he blew the man's body into bits of diamond and scattered it across the floor of a nuclear facility. Dark Beast painted a far different picture of the event than Xavier had a week ago when he planted the same memory in my mind. The child wept for the first time in years, wept not only for the end of his long and sordid nightmare, but also for the fact that he was no better than the man himself. At thirteen years old, he was a murderer, and he hated himself for that. Though Chuck chalked it up to self-defense, it shouldn't have been the boy who dealt the death blow, it should have the bald man himself. Pointing the gun, pressing the trigger. Not some abused little kid who had no idea what pulling that trigger would do.

If Charles meant to give him back some measure of control by having him kill his keeper, then it didn't work. The child only spun out from there, reeling in nightmares over the fact that he could take a life so easily, that taking that life was actually expected of him. Maybe that's why Chuck decided to erase his memories – the only way that he could think of to keep his hands clean. Why else wouldn't One-eye ever talk about it, talk about any of it? Why else would he naively agree to be the foil for Jean's madness? Quite simply because he didn't remember that he'd been through it all before.
The bile in my stomach turns rancid, crawls up my throat and threatens to escape. Not the first time these past three days that that's happened. I'm a hard man to shock, or so I like to think, but listening to all the bullshit spewing forth from Beast's mouth, all the horrors that befell that little kid, my stomach's been nothing but a knot since it started. From the Ram to the houseful of death, the beatings, the threats. And, to make matters worse, it was one of Slim's best friends that gave the dish. Henry McCoy kept those secrets for years, not telling a soul save the one creature he should never have talked to to begin with. No wonder he whined for months over that damn torture chamber. He was afraid Scott was punishing him for his wagging tongue. Afraid the delay in his rescue was revenge for not stopping Jean from beating the hell out of him, too.

Chelsea enters, absent lab coat and low slung heels. Dressed in jeans and comfortable shoes, she runs a check of the equipment, replaces an IV bag, and sits to watch the monitors for a while. “I believe you,” she says quietly. I have no idea what she's talking about it, and apparently my face expresses that. “That he didn't tell you anything. Torturing the two of you is a waste of time in my opinion. We should be readying our hit on the Avengers, not continuing this little charade.”

“Why are you doing this?” I ask through the sharp pain in my jaw. She stares at me, her dark brown eyes assuring that the magnet keeps my threat minimal. “Why are you working with them?”

She smiles. “You don't remember me, do you, Wolverine?” She polishes her glasses on the sleeve of her knitted tunic, huffing air to moisten the dirt. “You killed my mother.” If I could shrug, I would, but even my muscles don't have the strength to fight the polarity. “The Avengers arrived in Newark for some reason. My mother was the victim of rubble you created when you sliced a speeding car down the center. It smashed her against a light pole. SHIELD said she died instantly, and then called the whole thing an accident. I don't care if it was unintentional, the fact remains that you were directly responsible for her death, yet, as part of the Avengers, you were held above the law. There was no punishment for you.”

“You're doing all of this to punish me?”

Her laughter is both soft and arrogant. “Oh, I don't care about the mutants,” she reveals. “That's Osborne and McCoy, maybe Jameson, too, since everyone accuses him of being one of you. I'm only after the Avengers. Too many people die in your constant need to prove yourselves the most righteous of the human race. The mutants? Without your friend here, your species is a lost cause anyway, so why not just put them all of their misery.”

She adjusts an electrode connected to the exposed part of Cyclops' brain, a small patch of drying tissue drilled out in the heat of a seizure yesterday morning. A snap of her fingers and a tech arrives. She asks for the ionic jelly, new med pads, and anesthetic to clean the wounds because she can smell the beginning of infections. “The worst thing about living and working midst a bunch of soldiers is the hygiene,” she complains. “I'm by no means a germaphobe, but even the best filtration system that money can buy can't keep the air clean enough when in the sky.”

She washes wounds with the antiseptic cleaner, placing bandages over chisel marks and burns, stuffs rolled cloths into the gaping hole left from the exposure of his organs. She takes her time, humming a soft tune to herself as she works. “You know, I actually sort of admire him?”

“Who?”

“Cyclops.” She dabs white cloth into his eyes, cleaning out the slowly rotting junk left behind by clipped nerves and blackened brain fluid. To the tech, she sighs. “He's infected. Get me the antibiotics.” Then to me, she continues. “As dire as the situation was, he didn't give up. He fought like hell until the very end.”
The tech returns with a chest of antibiotics, which Chelsea begins to crush onto the table. “What makes you think he’s stopped fighting?” I ask in a sudden bout of defensiveness. I wish and don’t wish for his death. Out of pain, but still in control. Ultimately, that’s what I want. A pipe dream, I decide, if going by the shape of things.

“His brain waves,” she remarks and gestures towards he host of machines scurrying out their readings onto flat white paper. “He hasn’t reacted to anything in 43 hours. He's been defeated.”

_He sits silent on the eve of entering the Genoshan civil war. His fingers upon silent piano keys, he begins his symphony of savior and defeat, playing the stats over and over until the melody rings true. An F sharp for death, a C major for life, he weaves his symphony into the soundless air, adjusting to the movement of newsreels before him._

_Had it not been for his fingers drumming the air, I would have thought him asleep. His breath flooded out in an easy pattern akin to sleep and his heart was nothing more than a winter rain upon the snow. “Gettin’ it figured out?” I asked him._

_For long moments, he remained silent as he finished his calculations. Long tense moments of woven air and blank face. On that face, I could see the remnants of Apocalypse as they wove themselves within the configurations. A series of D sharps and E flats, off kilter keys within the major chords he had always primed himself to. Steps above and below his normal pattern of thought._

_When he finally looked at me, when that red visor lens finally turned towards my direction, my breath faltered. So sudden, so unexpected, I thought for a moment that he was going to kill me._

_“They need an escape route,” he said slowly, his baritone a fraction of confidence. “And we need boats. A lot of them at the end of those routes.”_ 

_Not his normal mojo. Cyke had always prided efficiency over all else; the quickest way to get the job done. Never before had he mentioned evacuating a whole populace in order to save them. That was not his job. “You okay, Slim?”_ 

_The hesitation gave me pause. “We can do it if we ask for help.”_ 

_“And just who are we going to ask for help?”_ 

_Staring at the spattering screens before him, he frowns. “The Avengers. You are a card carrying member, after all.”_ 

_“Cap won't intervene in international affairs. You know that.”_ 

_“He's done it before.”_ 

_“When it concerns the world, sure, but he ain't gonna lift a finger against a country that's been accepted to NATO.”_ 

_A dip of Adam's apple. He licked lips, began to speak, then stopped, his ruby gaze centered on the screens. Images of the distraught, the weak, the broken filtered through his senses like flour in a sifter. “They shouldn’t have to die.”_ 

_“I agree, but the Avengers aren't gonna help,” I sighed. “This is a mutant problem. Like it or not, the X-men are the solution.”_ 

_“Then we kill the geneengineers.”_ 

_The word 'kill' rolling off One-eye's tongue as if it were a piece of candy curled my stomach in two._
“Thought death was against Xavier's code, Slim.”

“It is,” he answered blandly, “but if it means the survival of an entire population, then I can't see a way around it.”

*His heart didn't skip a beat with those words. His face didn't flinch; his breath didn't falter. He was serious, as if the whole universe agreed with his words. “If we can't find the boats,” he issued into the silence, “then we kill them all. It's up to you, Logan. Convince Rogers to lend us his navy, or they're all going to die.”*

I thought back to all of the ridiculousness Cyclops had put us through over the past month. The mystery missions, the endless secrets. Some of it, I now I understood – the mapping of the tunnels, the marking of the bombs, but some I still had no clue. Emma, Namor, the pennies, the kiosk, the deli. A thousand mysteries, and I didn't have one answer to give.

“If I demagnetized you, would you attack me?” Chelsea asked.

“Yes.”

“Hence,” she said with a bow, “why I don't let you go. A smart man would say no. He'd let me take my chances. But, you, Logan, are not a smart man. All primal rage and the first thought in your head. If you ever want to stand above him, you have to learn to play things closer to your heart. Besides, a bit of mystery does wonders when trying to attract the woman of your dreams.”

“What makes you think he doesn't have a plan in the works?”

She tips the glasses back onto her nose, adjusting them upon the bridge so that they're centered perfectly over her deep, brown eyes. “For the sheer fact that he's here. No one would willingly put up with this,” she says with a gesture towards the mess of a man on the table, “in order to save less than two hundred people. And if, in fact, this was all part of the plan, then I'd be more worried about your leader's mental state than the survival of your species.”
LVIII

Chapter Summary

A deal is made.

Rocked to sleep by the print-buzz-click of readouts, Chelsea remains asleep upon Jameson's entrance. Charcoal eyes graze her overly relaxed form before lighting up on me with half-moon creased intensity. “Your little asteroid island is due to explode in roughly six hours,” he begins, taking a seat on a nearby stool. Roughened fingers dance across the various wires and rods that keep Cyclops' systems running at capacity. “After that, McCoy's going to take off with your friend here. I don't know what'll happen to him then, but I can tell you, it'll be worse than what you're witnessing now.”

“What do you want?” I ask, feeling the left side of my jaw begin to dislocate.

He shrugs. “I'm here to make you a deal, Wolverine. You and I are going to have a little chat. You're going to tell me everything from beginning to end, answer all my questions. If I'm satisfied with your story, I'll unplug your fearless leader here, let him die before McCoy can take off with him.”

“He's not on the ship, is he?” The slight raise of lips lets me know that I was right. “Where'd he go?”

“Some issue back at HAMMER headquarters, but he'll be back in time to watch the island blow on the big screen in the common room. So will Osborne.” He glances over at Chelsea, who whispers in her dreams. I think she says mama, but I'm not sure. “It's not like he'll recover from this. Even if you could heal the wounds, the man's mind is screwed. I can end his misery.”

The compassion is unexpected, and regretfully appreciated. Still, it's a choice I have to fight against for as long as I can. My voice wavers as I speak. “He didn't hear most of it. You drilled out his ears and--”

He glances again to Chelsea, a flicker of worry in his eyes when she stirs. He's going off book with this offer to me, and he can't have her finding out. Gently, he nudges her until she stirs. “Go get some rest, Chels. I'll take watch.” Barely awake, she rubs the sleep from her eyes and shuffles out of the room. “Look, I'm only offering this to you because no child should go through the kind of shit that he's been through. And McCoy – McCoy's dug up a lot of skeletons, a whole lot more. He knows that man's life from beginning to end, and he's gonna use it. He's gonna break your friend until he's some mindless puddle of bones before he lets him die. At least I'll make it quick.”

I'm a killer. I've been a killer for as long as I can remember. I've killed men, women, children. I've killed friends, lovers. The blood on my hands runs red and river deep. And, sure, I wish I could take it back. I wish I could undo all the death I dealt. But not once, have I hated myself for it. Until now. “What do you want to know?”

Jameson doesn't force me to look at him, doesn't revel in the guilt of my decision. All professional like, he just clears his throat and waits for me to talk. He doesn't get angry when my jaw pulls out of place, or the cartilage rips clear and I need time to heal. He just sits and waits as if he has all the time in the world. He has a lot of questions, still, stuff he doesn't quite believe, like how Cyke figured out the gas in a burst of inspiration rather than a mole. He still wants to know where Emma is, and I walk
him through that fight a good dozen times before he's finally convinced that I don't know either. He asks about the pennies, the deli, the newspaper kiosk. None of which I know anymore than he does. We talk through the cab ride, the alumina die, and the press conference. The ship captain, the cargo containers, the fishing nets, the glass factory and the hair salon, all these things he asks, and all these things I don't know.

“The gas made him paranoid.”

“Obviously,” Jameson nearly laughs and gestures toward the psionic inhibitor and nannite bomb. “How come no one noticed that he'd had surgery?”

I manage a chuckle of my own. “That's the thing about him, you know. He's always had a way of hiding in plain sight. As beat up as he was, it was easy to overlook fresh scars 'cause we were more worried about the old ones.”

“Do you think he got captured on purpose?”

For some reason it hits me then that I have a listening device cut into my jaw. And for the first time since our conversation started, I lie to Hunt Jameson. “I can see why you'd think that, but I don't think he did. He can't lead a team up here in the air, and there's no way he'd trust someone else to lead in the middle of all this.”

It's a lie that makes sense, and one that Jameson is near to accepting. But the idea of that listening device starts nagging at me. That he intended it for Bets, not himself; that he gave it to me instead of hiding it in his visor. The asshole expected to be put out of commission, probably once the nannite bomb was discovered. I doubt he expected the torture, but he definitely knew that he wouldn't be the one asking the questions. Yeah, the asshole had this planned from the start and expected me to figure it all out on my own. “You're going to do this before Porter brings 'em back, right? Don't want you to back out on the deal because you were caught unaware.”

“Relax,” Jameson answers. “I'll pull the plug as soon as we're docked at HAMMER. Won't be no surprises. Walk me through the nightclub incident one more time.”
Chapter Summary

Red glare.

The alarm blares out, a pulsating red light, and all guards are sent running to battle stations. A quick glare of charcoal eyes, Jameson hisses and spits. “You mother fucker. What did you do?” A quick leap off the stool, and the old man's out in the hall spilling orders to every guard, tech, and mech he can find. He sends them to the cell block, to the engine room, to the pilot's station, and to me. “That asshole moves an inch, blow his brains out,” he commands sending a dozen mechs collapsing on the room and disappearing as soon as they stand still.

It's not long after that I hear the first sounds of battle. A thud and thunk, the rapid fire of an automatic weapon, and the continued parade of given commands that sends another dozen mechs to the south end of the hall just beyond the door. “Where's Chelsea?” he demands of a nearby tech, grabbing him by the collar and slamming him into the wall.

“H-her room, I think,” the small man answers. Jameson drops him and heads north to the living quarters.

I know he's here. I can smell him. I barely catch sight of him out of the corner of my eye. Midnight fur and a puff of sulfur smoke, Kurt bamfs into the hallway and disappears again. I want to tell him to stay away, to warn him of the mechs, but I don't have time.

The battle rages on, and I get my first view of Petey in all his splendid steel. Crashing and bashing his way through agile footed guards, he takes a round of bullets to the back. Squinting in pain as the bullets bounce off, he grabs the guard by the head and knocks him unconscious against the wall. The body lands with a thud on the floor, his nose bleeding and his eyes shut.

Rogue's next, her arms wrapped up tight in the left neck of a mech. She punches the thing right in the face before ripping off cords, then forcibly tearing the guy out of the suit just so she can punch on him some more. Three hits to the stomach and one to the jaw, the guy's more burnt than toast on a Sunday afternoon.

A quick borrow of steel plates, and Rogue and Colossus pile into another team of guards and mechs, taking the bullets as they come and clearing a path for the arrival of the White Queen and Angel. A spray of paralytic feathers, and the guards go down fast, each gasping for breath as the paralytic takes hold. He checks them quick for pulse, makes sure he didn't kill them, before dropping them to the sides of the halls and making his way forward.

Emma takes her anger out on a mech, her seven a.m. wake-up call in full swing. A sweep of leg by diamond knee, and an upper cut to gut, she disconnects the wires to shoulder and head before the mech can right himself. Dirty work done, she leaves the rest for Rogue, who proceeds to rend the suit in half as she clamors for her target.

Nightcrawler bamfs down the hall, opening the door at the end just in time for Jameson and his bunch of whacks to come flooding in. Guns at ready, it's nothing more than a firefight, with Angel taking the pain. Wings outspread, he blocks the bullets from zooming past, keeping the arrival of
Surge and Dazzler safe and out of harm's way. A quick gesture to the right from Angel's blue fingers, and they each take note of the room beyond.

“Nightcrawler,” Angel speaks midst the spray of bullets. “I need that room secured. Noriko, get ready. I need a 487.” Noriko grins from ear to ear, lighting up her lightning hands. “On my count!”

Behind the shield of metal wings, Rogue grabs onto Dazzler and Emma, leaving Petey to wrap himself around Angel's shoulders. On the count of three, Noriko touches down on metallic floor, shooting streaks of static over the floor and into the soles of the soldiers' feet. In a rumble they quake, dropping their guns under the twitch of their muscles, ending the spray of bullets. Jameson curses as Ali pops in the jaw and sprawls him flat on the floor.

It's then I hear the whish of sulfur cloud somewhere behind me. In the seconds that follow, Nightcrawler drops a mech into the hallway and disappears. The room is a buzz with movement then, the mechs becoming briefly visible, making sure their guns are leveled my way. In the background, I hear the dismantling of the dropped mech, just as Kurt teleports again and grabs a second.

Bullets fly, hitting walls and breaking glass. I feel them hit my ribs. Watch them hit Cyclops. Near bloodless, the bullets pierce his jaw and chest, puncturing already wounded organs. The pain draws brow low over empty eyes, and the machines eke out their warnings with loud, unending pulses that run concurrent to the red alarms still ringing out in the hallways.

A metal shard pierces my neck, singeing flesh and piercing trachea as it breaks through glass hitting a steeled up Petey in the shoulder. Even steel grows red under the weight of anger. Enraged, Colossus kicks down on the ground and takes off on a rampage, careening through what glass remains and ramming a mech head first into the wall.

From there it's an all out brawl with mechs and heroes flying every which way. Emma gets tossed into the northeastern corridor where she takes on a new bevvy of guards who idiotically decide to shoot at her diamond flesh. Bullets bounce back, hitting one in the shoulder and another in the leg, and she takes care of the rest with a few choice throws that land them ass first into a nearby support column.

Noriko raises the temp again with a static shock to a fleet footed mech bouncing back and forth between his legs to prevent the pop of wires. She feigns a pulse to the floor, then grabs the robot jockey under arm disabling the suit entirely.

Colossus and Rogue pound away, smashing the metal suits to bits and stealing their operators from the controls, while Nightcrawler continues his port and drop to keep the mechs off balance. Ali blinds them all with bouts of light kicked up from all the noise, making the display as big and bright as she can until the mechs bow down in fear. Like Rogue and Colusses, she pulls the pilots from their suits and gives them a swift kick in the ass before throwing them to the side.

Wings spread wide, Angel has left the fight. He stands at the table both blocking bullets and blocking view. “Don't disconnect him,” I say as I watch his hands reach for the wires. “Those machines are keeping him alive.” Angel turns to look at me, his eyes rimmed with both outrage and grief. A few years ago, a look like that would mean Apocalypse's maleficence had taken hold, but since he's been with Bets, he's been more in control of himself than ever.

Fighting over, Angel folds his wings over Scott's body and orders the crew away. Nightcrawler is sent away on scout duty to see if he can find anymore pockets of guards or mechs. Ali and Rogue are on the hunt for the pilots, while Petey and Surge will keep cleaning house. “Give Reed Richards a com, see if he can remote access this thing and park us somewhere safe.”
She waits until they are out of sight before speaking. She avoids gazing at folded wings, at the pile of bloody rags, the machines, the wires. She avoids it all, and instead looks at me. Her voice soft, dazed, Emma asks me how to turn off the magnet. I nod to a small control box in the corner, close to the pile of red rags. With a swivel of joystick, the magnet melts away and I drop to the floor with a bang.

“T ook you bloody well long enough to get the flight direction,” she scolds and offers me a diamond hand to pull me from the floor. Draped over her shoulder, she leads me to a chair so that I can work on making my muscles work again and heal from the hail of bullets that pierced lungs and came out the other side.

“Sorry, darlin', I didn't think of it.” Which was true. “Had other stuff that... well... you'll understand.” Which was true as well.

Diamond blue eyes flick to wings and back. There's a softness to her lips, the slight tinge of pale pink as her diamond form begins to whither under the weight of her worry. “How bad is he?”

“How long until we can get him here?” Angel asks.

She shakes her head. “I couldn't convince him to come, or I would have brought him.”

“Then send someone else. Send the Cuckoos. He'll listen to them. And get X-club here so they can figure this out.”

“Angel,” she starts and presses soft hand gently upon the razor tip of wings. “How bad is he?”

“We need to call the teams below, keep them busy. Keep them from coming up here --”

“Warren, let me see.”

Diamond is instantaneous as wings unfold and reveal the mess of Cyclops' body. A way to block the sudden scream that threatens to pour from her throat. For long moments she stares at her would-have-been-lover, breathless and shocked at the visage. Knowing that she's breaking, Warren starts with the orders. We're to find blankets and sheets to keep the view blocked, that no one needs to see this save for necessary personnel. I'm to remove the device from my jaw and get rid of it, in case the kids back on Utopia attempt to listen in. Emma will send out the Cuckoos, and get Ariel to bring in the X-club. She'll keep the teams diverted until Angel can figure out a plan. “This stays under wraps,” he warns, “Do you understand? Not a word about it until I can think of something.”
Chapter Summary

The hard questions.

I can't sleep. As much as I want to, as much as I need it, I can't get my eyes to shut. Every time I try, I'm just reminded of... Elixir's in there now. His healing hands having a hard time with the mess. He says it chemical backlash from the IV's that Dark McCoy hooked him up to, and I don't doubt it. X-club's been analyzing the shit for the last six hours and each report they make has them more stressed and worried than the one before.

But, I don't want to think about Scott right now. Whether he's healing, whether he will heal... Right now, it feels so heavy, like two anvils upon my shoulders, forcing me to the ground. I know how to crawl, to feel the dirt in my mouth as I limp away from a bad situation. But this is more than dirt. How does someone do that to a little kid? And, how does someone use that as some hideous brand of torture? What kind of sick...

Static. According to Warren, one of three people that knew the entire plan – the others being Emma and Namor - those mystery missions were about listening to the static so that Scott could figure out where the bombs were without alerting Osborne. Tedious and complicated, but his biggest fear was that stumbling on a bomb would cause Osborne to retaliate and blow them all before the X-men had had a chance to disarm them.

Osborne had been using a system of underground tunnels and sewers to move the bomb materials to the various sites. Those systems hadn't shown up on blue prints for 100 years, but Scott found old records in the mayor's office and used those to narrow down the city wide search for the bombs. These tunnels connected to basements and speak-easy's all over the city, giving them places to camp for the night and watch over the tombs. Meanwhile, Porter brought the big guns to areas we got too close to, filling up the tunnels with mechs and gas guns, then watching the whole thing from a distance.

The mech suits interfered with our com systems, not only letting them listen in on our conversations, but also caused static the closer they got to us. Scott timed our set downs and take offs to determine where he thought the bomb areas were and used subsequent missions to refine those areas and figure out the buildings.

The doughnut deliveries sparked another type of subterfuge that no one suspected. With each box came a calling card, and in that card was a radio jammer that when activated would stop the mechs from hacking our system, leaving the X-men free to talk at will without being overheard when it came to deactivate the bombs.

He covered it all up with a series of distractions designed to throw Osborne off his trail. The pennies, the green shirt count, not to mention Emma, Namor, and the damn press conference. Cyke needed time to prepare, so he played it big to keep Osborne guessing.

But, two things Cyke didn't count on – me and the Apocalyptic Monster that ripped him in half. Had I listened, had I trusted him, it would been Bets in that chair, and she would have sent coordinates days ago, before things became irreparable.
“Here,” Emma says, nudging a cup of coffee into my hand. Taking a seat on the floor beside me, she stares down the hall at the waiting SHIELD agents still in the process of questioning Rogue, Psylocke, Noriko, and Petey about their roles in the take down of both HAMMER and the stolen helicarrier. They would rather talk to Cyke, but as Emma told them earlier, he's indisposed, so they'll have to make due. “I can't wait until they question Namor,” she speaks into the awkward silence.

Staring ahead at the dark blankets draped over the broken glass, I take a sip of coffee and force myself to laugh. “Wish I could of seen the Fish rip Osborne a new one.”

“Me too,” Emma says, a lilt of sadness to her forcibly upbeat demeanor. She cried for an hour once Elixir arrived and freaked out at the damage. Sobbed and bawled until her face was so raw that the tears refused to come. I'm surprised she's not still crying now.

“Was Namor in the room when --”

A hand on my knee, she settles me quickly. “No, just Warren and I. We're the only ones that heard. And neither of us have plans to tell anyone what we heard.” She recalls the shock of listening to the tales of Jack Winters, how she'd thought the missing memories had to do with the concussion rather than outright horror. Had she known, she wonders if she would have reacted differently. “I was angry when he locked me out, but when I finally heard his plan, I marveled at the thoroughness of it. He'd taken care of everything. I never imagined that this...” Her voice trails off into a deep sigh that hides a fresh round of tears.

“I doubt he did either.”

“It's not your fault,” she speaks in a low, careful tone. She taps her head with long, perfect finger to let me know that I was projecting once again. “It's not even Henry's fault, as much as I want to ring his neck right now. The fault lays with the perpetrators, and thankfully, they've all been gathered up and stuffed where doesn't shine.”

A thud inside the room, and a quick flurry of Rao's dismay. Foley's passed out again, not two hours after he wore himself out the last time. Getting Slim healed up is going to take days. “If I'd listened, then --”

“Then it would have been Betsy in that chair, yes. But, there's no guarantee that she would have gotten the coordinates and quicker than you did,” Emma explains, her diamond tone stern, but just soft enough to show compassion. “And there's no telling what they would have done to her. Cyclops assumed that Osborne would keep her alive because of her abilities, and he may well have. But Dark Beast is another matter entirely. You heal, Logan. She doesn't.”

Her words lessen the weight of the worlds upon my back. A slow nod and sip of coffee, I manage a smile just for her. She's a good woman, this Emma Frost, whether she thinks so or not. Rogue brushes past with a roll of her eyes, displeased with the inordinate about of questions she's having to suffer through. She wants to go home, back to Utopia, not stick around here for another three days waiting for SHIELD to finish up their investigation. “They won't even let us use the cafeteria,” she complains, and extols the virtues of actually having a choice of meals, like they do back on Utopia. “If I have to eat another bowl of rice and beans, I'm gonna pewk my guts out all over Maria Hill's shoes.” She rushes off in search of Dazzler, so the agents can double check Rogue's tales of the events. We watch her disappear down the hall.

Emma lays her head on my shoulder, weaving her fingers into mine. “You won't treat him differently, will you?” It's a difficult question, and not one I'm sure I can answer. “You're good for him, Logan. He would never admit it, but you make him better.”
“I don’t know about that.”

“I’m serious,” she says and squeezes my hand tightly. “You challenge him. You make him think about what he wants, not just what everyone else expects of him. If you change how you treat him, Logan, he’ll think that he’s lost you.”

A long, draining silence. “You ask a lot of me, Ems.”

“Only because I know you love him.”

She leaves me with a kiss to the forehead and makes her way back into the room.
He sits at head table, his eyes glued to the dozen screens yelling at him from above. His face still gaunt and shadowed from still-healing wounds, he grits his jaw and takes the tongue-lashings without a word of complaint. In the corner, Reyes watches him closely, unconvinced that he's ready for duty so soon after the ordeal, but he insisted, and when Summers insists, he makes it hard to disagree with him.

Steve Rogers glares through the screen, his mouth a long line of displeasure with the events. One by one he looks at the head table members catching eyes and sighs as he goes along the table. Finally, his blue eyes land upon Cyclops, whose red-lens stare is nothing less than blank. “You should have asked for help,” Rogers scolds.

Scott measures his words carefully, each one doled out with thought and precision. “To be told, once again, that it's a mutant problem?” There is no lilt to his voice, no coldness, no distance, just a truth that he's faced a hundred times before.

Exasperated, Rogers throws his hands in the air and folds them behind his head. “Come on, you know that's not the case, Cyclops.”

Deadpan. “Do I?” There are a thousand scenarios he could bring up – the bill that sought to govern mutant reproduction cycles, the destruction of Genosha, the bus load of 42 kids – but Cyke's in no mood to play semantics. He asks his question and lets the consequences roll around in Cap's brains while he deals with the other screens, especially Sadie Sinclair who is aghast that she was no informed about the bombs.

Once again, he explains himself – how he had to keep silent about the plots at work to keep the city safe; how he would find some way to pay for the ruining of the docks, and how he hoped this would not effect the mutants' relationship with the city, as they would continue to protect it.

Two hours later, the conference ends with nary a word from head table save for One-eye, who took as many hits as he dished out with his blank-as-hell leader-face. Not even Emma bothered to speak up to the screens, perhaps fearing that interrupting him would damage his pride further.

Though the stories of Winters are under wraps, the condition of his body when he was rescued has slowly made the rounds, including rumors of the Ram. His control, right now, over Utopia is diminished – at best, tenuous, at worst - with eyes-cast-down answers when he speaks and the whispers behind his back. Once again, he has walled himself off from the rest of us, preferring the silence of the War Room to conversations in the Common Room or meals in the cafeteria.

Head table dismissed, the heads-to-the-floor walks of shame filter out into the halls and disappear into more amenable surroundings, except for me. I stay behind. “Give him time, Scott,” I say, “Rogers will calm down.”

Without a bite of anger behind his teeth, “I don't care if he does or not. The X-men aren't a group of
children that need to be read our bed time stories when we hear a bump in the night. We'll take care of our own, just as we always have.”

“He didn't mean it like that,” I counter, hoping the slight raise of tone doesn't upset his flimsy hold on his own brewing temper. “Cap is--”

“Not someone we need to answer to,” he interrupts with a slight arch of brow, a signal that he's had enough of this conversation. He delves into the piles of paperwork stacked neatly in front of him. Pen in hand, he waits for my exit before he begins. When it doesn't come, he looks up at me, his red gaze impenetrable. “You have more to say?”

Silence. His words, his demeanor rankle me. “Yeah,” I breathe, hoping to contain the most explosive edges of my sudden need for rage. “I have more to say.”

Pen down on the table, he leans back in his chair and waits. He steels himself for another round of you-could've-you-should've, backhanded words that seek to hit him where it hurts. Jaw clenched tight, hands draped upon his lap, he waits with all the patience of a winter seedling, keeping himself still until the light finally warms him.

I consider him, then, the torment that he just underwent, how it's been three days since he sat up in that bed and ain't said a word about it. How he's still wrapped up with bandages and plaster under his loose fitting clothes, and how closely he's held his tongue. He's heard the whispers, the rumors, not a soul on Utopia hasn't, and considering how private he is, it's bound to be the driving force behind his current state of bring-it-on-I-don't-care. “Anything you want to talk about?”

“No particularly, no.”

Cut down again. “You know you're being an ass, right?” I ask him. He swallows hard at the words. I'm not sure if it's anger or pain or what, but it's at least something more than nothing. “Better ways to talk to people than what you've been doing.” He looks away. Finds some spot by the windows to concentrate on. A lick of lips, and false start, he shuts his mouth once again. He takes criticism all too well sometimes. “What Dark Beast did to you--”

“It's over,” he says all too quickly with a slight waver in his voice. “He's in jail. That's all that matters.”

“What Jeannie did to you--”

“She's dead, Logan.” And he will not speak ill of the dead.

I can't tell if he's looking at me or the window. His head slightly turned towards the right, his fingers folding into fists then releasing, I can feel the turmoil leach off him in waves. “Cyke--”

“I have work to do.” Conversation at an end, I slink off to lick my wounds in the privacy of my room.

Later that evening he calls me back to the War Room. He's got an assignment for me. He needs me to lead X-force.
Curl up beside the door frame, his shoes off, and unaware of my entrance, Scott Summers takes a much needed nap in the War Room. Screens still flickering with news, his pile of papers only half completed, his breath is soft and sleepy as I take my seat near the coms. I can hear the patrols talk to each other – an attempted robbery near the old train station, a fire on 54th, a possible hostage situation at one of the big, fancy hotels in town. Threats are discerned quickly, and Sam calls the patrols where they're needed most. “Emergency personnel is already at the fire. Rogue, I want your team at the hotel make sure that things don't get worse. Mine'll handle the robbery.”

Cannonball's a good leader, far more charismatic than Cyclops, and far less violent than Cable. No wonder Summers decided to take a nap. He's left the patrols in good hands.

I hate to wake him up, but reports need to be made. We've traced the Right to the basement of an old church down by the Tenderloin. Cyke needs to know, needs to plan.

He's ready for battle as soon as I touch his knee. Hand to visor, I'm lucky that he has that instinctual pause before letting force beams fly free, or I'd be a greasy spot on the floor. Gritting his jaw, holding his breath, he takes the seconds he needs to calm down, then issues his apologies.

I explain the clues that we've found thus far. The men we've followed, the tussles we've had. I report the weapons that they're using and the rhetoric that they're following. I expect a plan, some humongous maze of thought that sees us in and out of this with limited violence. Instead, I get, “Take them out.”

It's a shocking statement coming from the mouth of Scott Summers, a call for permanent violence. “The blood's on me,” he says quietly, almost regretfully, “but we need them gone by any means necessary.” He reminds me of the baby, and that the baby will be back soon. “We have to be able to protect her.”

As much as I want to talk him out of this, I also agree with him. Had he imposed this plan earlier, had he allowed us the violence, he never would've been captured, and the whole mess could have been avoided. So, in my wisdom, I simply nod. “I talked to Laura.”

“And?”

“I can't stop her from being part of this.”
“You're still angry with me for that?” An unintentional lowering of brows and tucked under lip. He regrets that he asked the question. Head focused downward towards the floor, it takes him long minutes of silence before he is able to look at me again. “You can gut me later,” he says, “once we survive this mess.”

I reach for him for the first time in two weeks. He withdraws and looks across the room, the shame burning bright red streaks over high cheekbones. Jaw flexes as he tries to find the words to explain himself. “It's okay, Scott,” I whisper, but my words don't soothe him. Brows drawn low, I can tell that he's closed his eyes tight behind red lenses, letting the course of anguish run through his system.

“I'm sorry,” he speaks, a breeze of words, almost too quiet to hear.

“Don't be.” I almost reach for him again, but think better of it. I watch as the memories play out over him, the held breath and flattening of lips, the way he jabs hand to hair, as if to push back the sudden wave of emotion. He chokes it back so quickly, so forcefully, that my heart hurts for watching it.

He's drowning, and all I can do is watch.

Months go by with no more words than my reports about X-force and other duties. Emma stopped complaining a long time ago, occupying herself with lifting morale and being his mouthpiece outside of the War Room. No one questions it anymore, that he sits there alone, staring at screens and directing our survival. No one dares argue with him either, that's what Emma's for.

On more than one occasion, Storm has remarked about the change in him, how removed he is from the rest of us. Yet, she does not say this to his face. And, so long as he's leading the charge and keeping us alive, I doubt any of us will.

Except for me. We've argued half the night over beer-knows-what, flinging insults back and forth until my claws are popped and he's ready to beam me to Portland. Papers fly through the air as he kicks my legs out from underneath me and sends me nose first into the table. Blood spews, and he keeps up his onslaught of fists and fury until I gather myself enough to shove him back into the white boards.

Scrambling up on knees, then feet, he misses my uppercut only to get slammed in the stomach with a sucker punch. He loses his balance again, slipping on green marker, and lands on his ass midst the mess. But he ain't done. Grabbing my ankle with both feet, he twists himself into a knot until I'm pulled over on my side and he's got my neck wrapped up in his elbow - choking the air out from me.

A snkt of claws and he backs up giving himself room to resort to other measures. Like watching a shell game, he keeps his focus on my hands, avoiding swipes and thrusts as he measures angles in his head. He shoots a small beam off the doorknob that comes careening back seconds later to knock me in the jaw. Another beam to the stomach, and I roll forward right, which is exactly where I want to be.

Claws in, I grab his knees with both hands, pulling in until he falls flat on the floor. Struggling to keep himself free, he fights as I jam my claws to floor to trap his wrists above his head, then grab him by the back of the neck. Breath hard and uneven, I smell the first trace scent of vanilla escape into the air.

A snkt of claws and he backs up giving himself room to resort to other measures. Like watching a shell game, he keeps his focus on my hands, avoiding swipes and thrusts as he measures angles in his head. He shoots a small beam off the doorknob that comes careening back seconds later to knock me in the jaw. Another beam to the stomach, and I roll forward right, which is exactly where I want to be.

Claws in, I grab his knees with both hands, pulling in until he falls flat on the floor. Struggling to keep himself free, he fights as I jam my claws to floor to trap his wrists above his head, then grab him by the back of the neck. Breath hard and uneven, I smell the first trace scent of vanilla escape into the air.

He tries to push me off the first time I bend in to devour the scent. Turns his head the second. I release my iron grip on the back of his head, and place my hand upon the too-fast heart beating withing his chest. Slowly, I smooth my way to his jaw, listening as the air within his lungs become more fluid, sedated with vanilla thoughts and the months long absence of touch. He presses cheek into my hand as thumb strokes the edges of his lips. And, the third time, he lets me win.
The kiss is deep and needful, filled with soft moans escaping both of our chests. I release his hands, and he collapses his arms around me, pulling my weight on top of him, and then he suddenly stops. inching back from underneath me, his hands on the floor slowly pulling him away from me, he stares at me. Jaw shaking, his breath coming in gulps, he shies away from my outstretched hand, and takes deep calming breaths until the his nerves become solid again. “Not here,” he says, a strange and sudden distance to his words.

“Scott, maybe we should—”

“Your room.”

He does not walk beside me. Following three paces behind, he trails me through the sleepy halls of Utopia, taking corners the same as me until we finally end up at the door to my room. Code punched, I enter and wait for him, making a mental note of the strange feeling in my gut.

Before he's even crossed the room, he's half undressed, his shirt and socks kicked off onto the floor. His pants down around his knees before he sits upon the bed. There are no scars from his torture, not ones that I can see, anyway. Done up right by Foley, only the normal scars remain. Even the slight sliver of Jean's name across his back is gone, a sight noted when he kicks off his underwear and pulls down the blankets to crawl underneath.

My gut tells me that something's wrong, that I should simply tell him goodnight and hope he gets some sleep. “Logan,” his baritone creeps into my thoughts, and I forget my own completely.

He kisses me tenderly as I pull naked into the bed beside him. So entranced am I by the touch of stars against my neck that I don't notice the lack of vanilla inside his kisses.

He traces me, down my neck, over my collar bones. His tongue caresses soft, wet circles over chest, and I feel the pulse of heat between my thighs. His name is a ghost upon my lips, called out as he sucks dark buds into alertness. Continuing over my chest, he weaves a gentle pattern of kisses and nips, pinching flesh so slightly between his teeth that the pleasure explodes upon my nerves over and over again.

As he continues his attention above, his hand seeks something more down below. A slow slide, he runs his thumb from base of shaft to head, teasing the ridge with his thumb, circling around me again and again until I'm hard and panting.

Breaking away, he smiles, and escapes to the drawer to find the bottle of lube. He collapses to my mouth again, devouring tongue and moans, and lets me roll him over onto his back. I take his mouth with all the urgency of an earthquake, searching and scouring him for signs of like need and desire. He tastes like coffee.

“Close your eyes,” I husk into his ear, a nip of lobe producing a sharp hiss and held breath. I remove red lenses, place them carefully on the night stand, and parade across shut tight eyes with a tender pelt of lips. I wrap my arms around him and tell him that's he's beautiful. He tenses as teeth set down on pulse, and finally breathes again when I release.

“Scott,” I begin, pulling back just enough that I can see the questioning under closed lids, “Are you sure about this?”

A pause, a hesitation, head tilts to right in thought. There's a scurry in shut eyes, a back and forth, and the sudden scent of burnt caramel that is quickly doused behind his words. “Yes,” I wait, looking for signals of regret, look for creases in smooth lines around his eyes, the roll of jaw, anything that tells me no. Sensing it, knowing that I'm ready to retreat, he pulls me close for another
deep, deep kiss.

The desire that wells up inside of me as his long fingers tangle into my hair, as his tongue treads across my lips, as he pulls himself into me, balancing on elbow to keep me close and intertwined, is near overwhelming. The trickle of stars in the wake of him is something that lingers upon my nerves as he turns onto his stomach. On his hands and knees, he waits for me, and oblige him I do.

I ready him with both care and speed, pulling his hips down low so that he's level with my waist. I push in slowly, reveling in the tightness. Inch by inch I push myself inside of him, near pulsating with want by the time I reach the end, then pull out as slowly to give him time to adjust. My pace is slow at first, almost slack compared to our earlier encounters, but it builds swiftly as I rush inside of him again and again.

I hold him where I need him, my fingers clamped down on once shattered hip bones. I can feel the predator in the back of my head, urging me to go faster, harder, to dominate him at his most vulnerable. And harder I push, until his head is pressed into the wall, and he's clenching tight to the edge of the mattress. I see it, I see what I'm doing, but I don't stop.

I maneuver inside of him, hoping to find the prostrate, to see his head pull back in ecstasy as I graze the gland, but he doesn't move with me. He takes my pace, even leaning back into me when I slam a bit too hard and leave his skin marked red for the effort.

The pressure builds inside of me, the stars begin to burst filling me with bright, white light, and I explode inside of him, my essence spilling out with the few, final, tired thrusts I have left in me. He drops to the mattress, and makes room for me beside him.

Hand reached over his side, I attempt to deal with his own need, but he swats my hand away. Relief in his voice, he whispers, “It wasn't you.” Then, fearful, “I'm sorry.”

Though drowsed from my exultation, the words immediately set me on edge. A too-long silence. My voice is darker than I mean it to be. “What do you mean?”

“I wasn't sure,” he says quietly.

“Well, what do you mean, Scott?”

He turns to look at me then, his brows creased to sadness over eyes, his lips pursed to stop their trembling. “I'm sorry.” I can see the deaf-blind memories, the recollection of pain and lack of control play over his face, the horror of his torture paling his skin and crushing lower lip between teeth.

The rage that overtakes me is both sudden and ardent. “Fuck you!” I yell, jumping out of the bed. “I would never-- do that to you!”

“I'm sorry,” he repeats, wiping a tear from closed eyes. He moves across the bed, patting around on the nightstand to find his lenses.

“You could've just fucking asked me, you asshole! How could you think that? After everything I've done for you, and that's what you think? That I'd rip in you half just to get my rocks off? Fuck you, Summers!” He slides glasses on just in time to catch the clothes I throw at him. “Fuck you!” I say again, picking up the pile of clothes in the corner of the closet.

Into the bathroom I storm, and though I hesitate just a moment, the sheer humiliation I feel drives my hand. I pick up the bottle of aftershave from the sink and throw it at him. He catches it easily in one swift hand, stares at it for long quiet moments, then looks back to me. “Get out,” I tell him, just itching to pop my claws and stab them through his tiny little heart.
“Logan, I- please. I'm sorry,” he begs.

“Get your clothes on and get the fuck out of my room!”

He shakes his head, hot tears streaking down his cheeks. “Please, Logan. I didn't think—”

“You're damn right you didn't think, you mother fucking asshole.” Claws out, I grab a shirt from the pile in his arms. A low, deep tone, snagged with snarls and spite, “You get your clothes on and get the hell out of here before I forget who you are and stab you through the fucking throat.”

The flash of adamantium stalls his arguments. Steel jawed and composed, he sneaks himself back into his clothes, and gathers up his belonging. “I gave you a place, Scott. A place to be safe. How dare you think that I would hurt you like that after everything I've done to protect you. And to be a fucking snake about it. I don't care what kind of convoluted plans you come up with to face our enemies, but after all these years, I deserve your fucking respect, not some half-ass plot that makes me out to be a fucking animal.”

He says nothing. He looks at me, then down at his things. With a soft nod, he unlocks the door and leaves.
Eighteen months ago, I died. On a Wednesday. Just like Kurt, like Nathan, like Chuck.

I saw my funeral from afar, that all-star affair with speeches from people I barely recognized. And the person I wanted to be there, didn't show. But, I suppose that's because he knew.

The plan was his, after all.

My way out. My way forward.

I left Utopia in a state of shock, doubled down on Cyke's bad decisions, made a play that didn't work. It was me or the highway, he chose the highway. Even threw in Jean just to make it hurt. That I loved her, and that I scared her. Ironic since she scared the shit out of him even more.

After killing Charles Xavier, he was the most hated man on earth. Hell, even he hated himself for killing the man, maybe even more than he hated himself for killing his own son. He said it was the Phoenix, but for some reason, we couldn't look past it, like we did with Jeannie, or the Cuckoos, or the rest of 'em. Petey was all Phoenix, Namor was all Phoenix, Emma, Illyana. But, Scott was still Scott.

At the time, it seemed right to blame him. He'd shut me out the minute I handed him that aftershave, and no matter I did, wouldn't let me back in. Not that I did much to try and get back in his good graces. I kept up with X-force long after he shut it down. Blamed him for Kurt. Blamed him for a lot of things, then left the island in shambles.

No fucks given after that. I threatened to kill him. More than once. One more than occasion. Stuck my claws in his face and waited for him to wince, but he didn't. I got the feeling he wanted to die. I refused to grant him that mercy.

The same mercy he later granted me.

It was Emma who delivered the plans. A thick manila envelope filled with page after page of bounty hunters and possible plans, and then a way to avoid them all, to move past them, and get away free. Like Summers, like Emma, like Eric, I'd been infected with nanosentinels that were chewin' away at my very bones. Shut down my healing factor, left me open to adamantium poisoning. They had the cure, thanks to Forge, who'd crawled up out of some damn hole in the ground to give it to 'em. Problem was, it took months to clean out the infection, and I didn't have months. Not with the bounty on my head.

Emma told me that it was the about the school, the one started in his wife's name. That I was dangerous, that if I wasn't careful, all of those mutants- those precious, precious mutants that had been revived by the Phoenix– were going to get killed because of my past, and he wasn't going to let that happen. But, Emma told the truth. He simply didn't want to live in a world where I wasn't around.
She didn't say much else, even after a half bottle of whiskey. Though I plugged her for his state of
mind, she wouldn't say. All I could go on was what I'd seen and the various news reports of vague
threats against the world if mutants weren't left alone. He was a fucking ass, but an ass with a
purpose. Protect his kin no matter what; protect the innocent and defend his kind. And for that, the
world hated him.

As much as I hated him myself, I found myself admiring him.

He was doing what so few of us had the courage to do. Standing up to the man. Telling them how it
was. Mutants had gone from a nearly extinct species, to a thriving populace filled with hopes,
dreams, and fears. He wanted to eliminate fear from that equation, and took on the entire world in
order to make that happen.

I'd never seen him so confident, or so dead inside.

He no longer cared if he was hated, feared, ousted. He no longer worried over Storm's thoughts, or
Bobby's admonishments. His adopted family – the ones he led for a lifetime had turned against him
when I left, and remained against him throughout. They called him names that, at one time, would
have shredded him to his bones. They argued and fought, forced him into corners that they were sure
he would never come out of. But escape he did, constantly fighting to right the wrongs, and in the
end, it cost him his life.

Three months ago, on a Monday, Blackbolt killed Scott Summers.

Half the world cheered. The rest fell into mourning as the savior of the mutant race was laid to rest
on the island of Genosha – the site of the largest mutant massacre the world had ever seen.

San Juan is a bit warm for my tastes. Balmy and buggy, it eats at my nerves sometimes. But they
have beer. Good beer, and cheap. A couple of pints at the bar, and I see myself home- up the hill, a
mile by dirt road, then another mile uphill, until I reach the forest. An hour later, I see my cabin, all
dark and dreary, but quiet.

A couple of cases on my back, a bite of jerky and a pack of plantain chips, I wander up the hill and
finally reach my front door before the stroke of midnight. The scent stops me in my tracks. Lilac and
ginger, sunflower and raindrops. There's only one person that wears a scent like that, and I'm in no
mood to see her.

She's as bad as they come anymore. Her deal with Hydra. With Cap. Between Steve Rogers
becoming an agent of Hydra, the X-men scrambling last defenses against the Inhumans, the world's
gone insane since Scott's death. I can't believe he's gone.

Hedging up outside my ramshackle door, I clutch my chest. The heave of grief and guilt
overwhelming me to my knees. She's knows I'm here. I can feel the tickle of her thoughts inside my
mind. She thinks I'm stalling, but in truth, I'm so overcome that my body refuses to move.

I hated him. With every breath, every heartbeat, I hated him. And her too. For taking him in, for
covering for his sins. In so many ways, she prodded him on in his hopeless quest to seek equality in a
world that will forever fear us for our genetic birthright. Turned him into the monster that he became.
The monster that killed Xavier. And now, Emma Frost sits on my sofa, drinking tea, of all things.

With held breath and lowered brow I open the door.

She's brought gifts, peace offerings. Bottles of scotch and bourbon. Baskets of salami and bags of
pretzels. Oranges and grapefruit, fresh sheets and soft towels. A stack of best sellers and three
country hams. “I wasn't sure what you'd accept,” she admits upon seeing me, her blue eyes scouring her offered bounty. “So I brought everything I could think of.” She offers up a basket of strawberries and a bottle of champagne, popping the cork with little effort. “This is for us,” she says with a smile, “For all we’ve been through.”

I set my beer down beside the ragged sofa, suddenly embarrassed that I'm entertaining the White Queen in such dusty surroundings. Graciously, she smiles, places a hand upon my shoulder. “It’s fine, Logan.” She pours the champagne with a wicked grin upon her lips. “Even the White Queen can suffer slumming it every once in a while.”

Though I don't expect it, though it goes against every fiber of my being, I can't help but laugh. Champagne in hand, we toast to the rise of the mutants, and that they are once again not an endangered species. “I never expected that you'd choose such a tropical climate.”

“Exactly why I chose it,” I explain with a grin of my own. Drinking down my mug, I top our glasses off with a smile. “Hope you didn't expect to have leftovers.”

“Leftover champagne is a crime, dear,” she quips in return. Swallowing the glass as fast as she can, she holds her flute out for another round. “I brought three bottles. Just in case.” A slip of a chuckle, and she drops the strawberry in her glass before downsing it again.

I fill her glass and grab the hefty bottle of bourbon lying at my feet. “You don't mind, do you?”

“Of course not. That's what I brought it for. Six whole bottles. More, if you accept a certain contract.”

The words spur me off kilter for a moment. If it's the arch of platinum brow or the long-ached-for-taste of bourbon, I'm not sure, but I keep myself calm and carry on. I get drunk easier than I used to. From what Emma tells me, the cure for the nanosentinels is still working its way through my system. “Your bloodstream was flooded with them,” she explains, taking careful measure of her cadence as the alcohol has already hit her head. “A 95 percent influx, whereas Scott and I suffered from a mere 50 percent.” Therefore, it would take longer to heal me than them.

She blames it on the upstart Hellfire Club that sprung up in her absence. The little children who thought to play with the big dogs and sent clouds of the nanosentinels to infect the Utopian inhabitants. “The adamantium toxicity made it easier for them to multiply, hence why you have had a harder time combating them than Scott or myself.”

The tense of her words give me pause, but I figure it for a slip of tongue. Too much champagne. Jet lag. Anything other than what I wish they implied. “Thank you, by the way,” I manage between the sudden jet set pace of my thoughts.

“For what?”

“Saving me.”

“Oh, I didn’t save you, darling,” she quips with a grin tucked against her cheek, “He did. From Westchester to Madripoor, it was all his plan. I was simply a messenger delivering an envelope.”

“Fine, if you must know the truth, they’re his plans, Logan.”

“To fake my death.”

“To keep you alive.” She swigged the whiskey down in two gulps and refilled her glass. “You're sick, darling. Infected. It can be cured, but you'll need time to recover.”
I looked at her with as much disgust as I could muster after half a bottle of whiskey. Teeth bared and fists clenched I poured my own glass and swallowed it down in half the time. “Maybe I don’t want cured, ‘dahling’.”

“Maybe you want my fist up your ass, punkin.”

“Touche.”

An idle clink of glasses, a cheers and a swallow, we gulp our shots and slam our fists against the table. “I’m thinking six months at most,” she bargains, refilling our shots.

“How much is he thinking?”

She takes a breath, deep within her lungs, and stares intently at the shots before us. “Considering the reproduction rate, a year at least.”

Shots downed and refilled. She’s woozy already. Not half a bottle yet, and she's swinging like a playground. “Fuck that.”

“At most, he thinks three years.”

She pours, I drink. I notice her still full glass, but don’t say anything. She doesn’t have the stomach for the strong stuff. Wine and cocktails, the fluffy stuff. I hope she hired a driver for this little trek of hers. “It’s a good plan, Logan.”

“So was that shit with Osborne, according to you.”

Low blow, and I knew it. Stung like a thousand bees, she leaned back in the booth, eyes staring at random pictures of fiddles and goats hanging upon the wall. I almost feel sorry for her. Almost. “I hate him, Ems.”

“I don’t care,” she responded, her voice a shade past gray. “He worked for weeks on this. It’s a good plan.”

Grudgingly, I skimmed the stack of papers before me. Lists of bounty hunters who clicked on the call, possible tactics, possible teams, and at the end, a way out. A three page list of explicit instructions that would see me dead, but still alive. “Fake my death. That’s his answer?”

“For a time.” Another dulling of her nerves, she downed her shot and poured another. “Until you’re better.”

“What about the school? What am I supposed to --”

“We’ll take care of it.” Her words were far to calm, far too measured to be disbelieved. Wide eyed, I stare, not sure of how to respond. “We’ll do everything in our power to make sure the school is safe.”

It was a matter of weeks before the rumors started. That he’d gone back to her. Crept up to her bedroom in the middle of the night. Seeking solace, seeking something other than solitary. Rogue was the first to notice it on one of her nightly walks. Said she saw him punching in codes that kept blinking red, and finally she answered and let him in. He was alone, as he should’ve been at that point. Too many days of swatting us off like flies. She said he hugged her, and that she hugged him back.

Cannonball saw her kiss his cheek on some midnight walk through the gardens. Magical, he said.
To see them. She on her tippy toes, he bending low, so that she could place her lips upon high cheekbone. Sam wanted a love like that, a love that could overcome. It wasn't until months later, after the death of Cable, that Sam learned to hate him, too.

“You broke him, Logan,” she says in the silence. “He needed me.”

I hate guilt trips. “He broke himself.”

I could’ve forgiven almost anything. He could have dug the eyes from my skull with plastic spoons, and I would have let it go. Chalked it up PTSD or some nonsense. But that his trust in me was so little, that he even thought for an instant that I could do that to him. My heart evaporated, and without it, there was only hatred. “The man went off the deep end.”

She doesn't argue the point. Doesn't defend him any further than once again telling me that Xavier was going to kill him, so the Phoenix killed Xavier instead. But, other than that, she takes it all in stride. “Logan,” she soothes into the silence, topping up our glasses with our preferred taste in alcohol. “What would have happened if all those people died?”

She speaks of Idie, I'm sure. The little girl forced to kill a dozen men to prevent a bomb from exploding. “Kids shouldn't have to kill,” I seethe as I remember the look on the girl's face. She thought she was a monster, and that her purpose was to murder those who would murder others.

“He didn't force her. It was her own choice...”

“She shouldn't been given the choice. Kids shouldn't have to kill. He – of all people – should've known better.” My temper turns my voice into growls and snarls, and tipped over by good bourbon, those guttural sounds become slurred and sloppy. She's not afraid of me.

She takes a moment to explain the question again. Rephrasing it until my eyes spark the recognition of what she's asking. A hundred lives were at stake – innocent lives – whose sole crime was to celebrate the accomplishments of mutants. Idie saved those lives. “Had they died, Logan, would you have blamed him for that instead?”

“You're saying that is was all personal? That I would've found any excuse to --”

“No,” she interrupts calmly, “Not entirely, anyway. Scott had to make a lot hard choices, Logan, and those choices didn't always suit his sensibilities. But, in the end, it was those same decisions that saved us. He sacrificed himself for us, stained his soul with blood to keep us safe. It's okay to be angry, my friend, but he deserves better than hatred.”

Though sloshed with too much champagne, her words are still too precise to mistakes. She means what she says, and I feel my heart quake with my knees. “He's alive, isn't he?”

“That's why I'm here.” She studies me for long moments, my face, my silence. A deep breath. “I need your help.”
“He’s not the man he used to be,” she warned me before explaining how the Phoenix returned his memories. How she’d spent months trying to keep his mind from falling apart under the weight of them, but in the end, failed miserably. “He’s quite... traumatized.” She’d stayed with him for some months after his complete breakdown, but the mutants needed a leader, someone who would stand up for them, and no one else was rising to the challenge of a Hydra run America and the continued hypocrisy of the Inhumans.

Years of memories, from Jean, Winters, the orphanage. Years upon years of nightmares flooded him all at once, and he was left to trying to grasp the pieces as they tore across his mind. Sometimes, he would be successful, and the memory would float upon him like a fog, dazing him for days on end as he dealt with the demons that he’d uncovered. “I have to force him to eat, to exercise, to not harm himself. Telepathic compulsions,” she explained softly. “And unfortunately, my time in the outside world is too demanding to give him the proper attention.”

The telepathic connection had been both blessing and beast. As the torrent of memories shredded across his brain, he fell to the ground in seizure, convulsing and flailing as his mind tried to grab some shard of past to lessen the flood’s impact. For me, it was just as nearly overwhelming, forcing me to hold to the sofa for balance, knocking my knees together, and emptying my stomach onto the floor.

The piece he grabbed was small, almost benign in the scope of other things that I saw with in the downpour.

A little girl, twelve at most to his seven years. Sandy hair and freckles, bright green eyes that peeked out from underneath long lashes. Her voice was like sandpaper, and her smile broken with missing teeth. She believed him. And, for that, he twisted the long stem of buttercup into a circle, and placed the ring upon her finger. “I’m going to marry you one day,” he said, his voice so small and happy. She scuffed his hair and laughed, replying that she was far too old for him, and he’d be better off with a girl his own age.

His head tilted to the left, his dark brown eyes searching her for misstep and anger. “But we can be friends,” she said, pulling his scrawny body into her shoulder. She laughed as she held the makeshift ring to the sun, fanning out her fingers so that the light shone through the petals. He was smaller than he should've been. His bones jagged underneath his skin, and his skin dull from lack of nourishment. Dark circles under his eyes revealed the length of sleepless nights, the beginning of years of a nightmarish seven years, trapped within the machinations of stronger men, and from
there, get even worse, when his keepers became stronger, more devious, and more hell-bent on saving the world.

On its own, the memory would have been a pleasant one, but Scott immediately matched it to a piece that he'd found some weeks before. A devastating memory of a young girl strangled in her sleep, her eyes wide with fear and her mouth flung open in voiceless scream. He scrambled through his memories trying to find the rest of it, to figure out what had happened, but the pieces were gone, exhausted. A three day seizure of nightmares, and all he managed was a scrap.

Like a zombie he walks across the living room, his bare feet padding slowly upon the carpet to tile. It's noon and he must eat. I watch as he opens the refrigerator, and removes the makings of a sandwich. No mind within him, he eats by telepathic command alone. Meat and tomato, mayo and bread, he orders the things across the counter, then opens the drawer for a knife.

I catch his wrist just seconds before he plunges the thing into his stomach. His will is strong today, weighted down by his most recent time spent trying to grasp the pieces of his life. But, I'm stronger. “I've got this, Emma,” I call to her through his mind, and within moments, he falls to the floor, gone to the world. I drag him back to the living room, set him upon the daisy yellow sofa and cover him with the large orange blanket folded at the edge. All orange and yellow, pinked eggshell and warm browns, she sought to surround him with light and comfort in her choice of decorating schemes, to keep him energized and fighting. She forgot that he only sees red. To him, the bright and cheery room must look like the flames of hell, burning and thrashing against him, taking payment for his sins.

I place the sandwich on the coffee table, and sit him upright just enough so that he can eat. His head lolls back in a daze as he scours his mind for the various pieces of his puzzle, trying his best to glue them together. “Scott,” I say, shaking him into consciousness. Slowly he rouses, still not aware, but not completely gone either. “You need to eat.”

I put the sandwich midst his clumsy fingers, hoping that he takes a bite on his own. Red visor sways in a sudden heave forward. Bent over knees, the sandwich falls to the floor and within moments, it's covered in bile and sick. “Shit.”

It was mere hours ago that the parade of unwashed memories frightened through his head. A two day wait for his limbs to finally stop moving and for me to get him cleaned up and hopefully back on his feet. And here it starts again. I can feel the headache pound at the back of my head as the first wave seeks to override him. Pulling him onto the couch, so that his head is protected by pillow instead of slamming against the floor, I get him as comfortable as I can before his mind breaks against the tide.

No windows, no bed, no lights overhead. A toilet and a blanket. The room measured about twice his body length and just as wide, and considering he was eight years old, that room was fucking small. Body hedged against the wall, his stomach growled in complaint, but the child ignored it, staring at the tray of food set down through door slats, still making his decision.

The food made him sick. Put nails in his stomach and hammers in his head. He couldn't help but throw it up. He swore that he was being poisoned, but no one believed him. It was the poison that put him here -again- in the first place, when he spewed his meal into the laps of the prospective parents who'd come to meet him. He told them he was sorry, that they were poisoning his food, and that he couldn't help it. Dr. Milbury told them that he had emotional issues from losing his parents.

He hated the Box. The empty room plunged in darkness. It gave him nightmares. A tall man with pale silver skin who stuck him with needles and carved him with scalpels. He was always staring at the child's eyes, staring deep inside them, prodding them with mechanisms that looked like they'd come out of old science fiction novels.
The adults didn’t believe him about the man either. Milbury had even laughed, saying there was no way in or out of that room save for the single door that was assuredly locked tight. “Better hope there’s never a fire,” the doctor would say, “because you’d be the first to burn.”

Milbury had a penchant for putting him in there for the smallest infractions, unlike the other children. There was the failed reading test – because he was behind on the reading scale thanks to both the concussion and a whole year gone from his memory after that – being late for lunch, not participating in gym class because of his headaches, among so many other things that the boy had lost count. Of the two years that he’d been at the orphanage, he’d spent over half of that there, in that deep, dark room taunted by a nightmare that seemed to him to be more than real. And now the poisoning.

The other kids made fun of him, called a pussy, a weakling. They pushed him to the ground and knocked the books from his arms. Scott had learned already not to fight back. Fighting back would only put him in the Box, but so did wasting food.

Scott stared at the tray of beef stew and bread, the cups of water and juice, the bland pile of overcooked vegetables. It smelled so good to a stomach so hungry. Patterson tapped on the door and looked inside. “If you don’t eat, kiddo, they’re going to change my duty roster. I won’t be guarding this door anymore.”

Patterson was nice to him, though even he didn’t believe the tales of purposefully poisoned food. Patterson played music during the day, just loud enough for Scott to hear through the cast iron door, and that sound was welcome. Patterson liked rock music – Pink Floyd, the Doors, the Who. Scott preferred the Mozart and the Beethoven that he remembered hearing on his father's old record player. One of the few memories of his father that remained after the concussion.

His father would conduct in open air, a spatula as a wand, and the tune doled out in smooth baritone over bubbling pots and pans. His arms would get frantic with the lifting of the music, pound through the emptiness, his face growing red with held breath and enthusiasm. And when he was done, he would take a bow and scruff the boys' heads before shooing them on their way so he could finish cooking supper.

Scott didn’t want to get Patterson in trouble; more so, he didn't want to lose the few kindnesses the bulky guard showed him. A slight nod of head, and scrawny fingers crawled over concrete to grasp the tray. Patterson smiled and shut the door, leaving him in peace with his final decision.

Even though the food lacked salt and every other spice, to a boy who hadn't eaten in three days, it was a godsend. Endorphins exploded across his nerves as he mashed carrots through his teeth and swallowed. The beef stew went down all too quickly, and left him licking the bowl for the last reserves of broth and bits. Water, juice, he downed it all, staring at the puff in his stomach from finally eating a full meal.

The poison would take hours to take effect, he knew that, and would earn him another week in his lonely little cell. But, at least Patterson would be gone by then, on his way home to whatever family he dutifully looked after, so the blame would not be placed on him.

It's evening when the overload finally stops. His body calms into a deathly stillness as his brain twists and turns the most recent memory, hoping to find it's match. It's Emma then, to the rescue, pulling him up off the couch and into the kitchen, where he stuffs his mouth with carrot sticks and chews. “It's fine, Logan,” she eases inside my head. “He will have better days.”

He does not sleep soundly, his mind haunted by shadow images of Sinister and his experiments. Cutting the child's torso, he flays the skin and prods still beating heart with measuring sticks and
needles. He injects fluid into the boy's eyes, blinding him for days on end. He hooks him up to countless machines, and mmm's and ah's at the various readouts.

But the physical experiments pale in comparison to the psychological tests that Sinister put him through, most of it still existing within the flood, but enough that I finally understand why Scott is prone to solitude.

“She quit,” Milbury said, his dark eyes staring down at the child. “You'll have to find someone else to pity you.”

Scott stared at the empty office, noticing the slight stain on the carpet. To him, it looked like blood. To Milbury, it was ink. “Perhaps she was grading one of your assignments, and that's why she left.”

Ms. Case was a round woman with a broad smile and sausage fingers that were constantly in motion. Be it drumming on the desk, or scribbling with a pen, she was the best teacher at the school. All of the kids loved her, especially Scott. She’d been tutoring him in English, trying to help him with his reading since he struggled so much. And, she always seemed to know when one of his headaches came on, and secretly snuck aspirin into his hair-clenched hand.

The first day she’d held him after class, he feared that she would send him to the Box for failing another comprehension test, but she didn’t. “How long you were you in a coma?” she asked. Hesitantly, he answered a year. “So from six years to seven, you had no education, but you're still in a second grade class. No wonder you're struggling.”

She spent her afternoons walking him through first grade books, teaching him to read and figure out words in context. Patient as an oak, she prided him on his growth, and instructed him on what to work on. Scott took it all to heart, using her words as a child's mantra, that he would be better tomorrow than he was today.

Two days later, they found her body.

It was Toby who told him. Poked his finger in the younger boy's chest, laughed as Scott's heart fell to his knees. “She's dead, you wuss. Now, you'll never learn to read.”

Her skull crushed, her neck bruised from strangulation, the police thought it a robbery gone wrong, as her watch was missing, and her purse. But, that stain in the carpet set his hairs on end.

His breath is shallow as he rises from the bed. In a telepathic daze, he heads to the kitchen and begins to make his breakfast. Eggs and toast, a bowl of oatmeal. I take the utensils from his wandering hands, and force him to sit at the table. “I'm awake, Emma,” I tell her so that she will let him go. Head down on the table, still exhausted from the previous night, he rolls back into memories, forgetting that I exist.

After breakfast, it's exercise, something that Emma is keen to keep up with. No need for his body to waste even if his mind is something less than spectacular. He runs the treadmill, lifts the weights, all that he needs to until she releases her hold on him and he hits the ground with a thud.

Himself, for the first time in weeks, he stares in awe at his surroundings before turning to me. “Where am I?” he asks. A not uncommon question anymore. He never remembers. “Logan? You're dead.”

The fear upon his face is palpable. Bared teeth and jagged brow, he grabs fistfuls of autumn hair and pulls until I fear he will rip them out. In a rush, I bend to him, grab his wrists and pull them down. “It's okay, Scotty,” I soothe, pulling him into a tight embrace. “It's okay.”
He's cold. Chilled by sweat and quaking nerves, he shivers inside my arms. “I've got you, hon,” I whisper into his ear. “I've got you.”

But the headache comes too soon. His iron grip upon my shoulder, he cuts the skin with need-to-be-trimmed nails. Thankfully, Emma’s little gift of telepathic connection doesn't include the majority of pain that has him gasping for breath and tearing at my skin. “Please,” he begs between the ebb and flow of the coming wave, “help me.” His desperate plea is lost to the sudden barrage of memories that fire synapses and neurons into overheating. His body falls into shakes, convulsing on the floor just to the right of the treadmill. I quickly find a pillow to cushion his head from the hardwood floor.
His body moved on its own. Arm stretched out, his fingers touched the cold, dead cheek of Dani, her eyes, thankfully, no longer open. The smell of her decay made him nauseous, and he could feel the few bites of spaghetti in his stomach attempt to spill.

He was not allowed to cry. The tall, pale man – the nightmarish creature that took him away in the dead of night to poke and prod him with needles and other devices – had warned him already. One tear and he'd pull out the boy's eyes. So, Scott Summers did not cry. “She wasn't special enough for you,” the man spoke, his eyes dangerously narrow and cruel. “And you weren't strong enough for her.”

Against his will, the child placed a soft kiss upon the girl's forehead. He fought the rush of tears that stung the back of his eyes, the shiver of his jaw. “The world does not want you, son,” the man said, “It's best for everyone if you learn that now.”

It's Storm who figures it out first. A gut feeling, she explains, based on the way Emma was acting. She'd traced a peculiar ship to the island – a supply ship containing whiskey and vegetables – an odd combination until she realized who the ship was for. She wants us to return, to pick up the reigns of leadership. She's made too many difficult decisions. Perhaps ruling Wakanda alongside T'Challa had, indeed, softened her to the perils that mutants face. “Your heart, his head,” she whispers, “We need you both to return.”

Scott wanders absently into the room, not sure where he's at. Storm calls his name, rises to wrap her arms around him in a hug, but he backs away far too quickly, tripping over his own feet in the process. Hands above his head, he shields himself from fury. Pale blue eyes then turn to me.

His mind reels with images of Sinister and Winters, Jean and Xavier. He sees Patterson's dead body hanging from the orphanage bell tower. Chuck's lifeless corpse at his feet. He feels the fat man laying on top of him, making it hard for him to breathe, and he cradles Jean within his arms. He swarm through the needles and instruments Sinister poked and prodded him with for years on end. He takes the knife to the back as Jean spills his blood for the first time. Backhanded to the floor by diamond hand, and again, Xavier's corpse at his feet. “It's okay,” I say, inching closer little by little. “It's just me, Slim. Ain't gonna let anything hurt you. It's okay.”

Kneeling down beside him, he tries to scramble, blocks me from touching him. I grab his arms first, to keep him stable, then his head. “Look at me, Scott. It's just me. No, look at me. I'm not gonna hurt you.” After moments of the delicate struggle, he finally seems to hear me. Red gaze turns towards
me, his breath still choked by the horror in his mind. Hands on his face, I smooth the fear-chilled skin and wipe the tears that fall from under red lenses. His whole body shakes when I embrace him, so much doubt and fright, his mind can't keep up with all of the changes. For long moments I hold him there, thankful for the trust that I can feel tinge across his thoughts. He lets me stroke the back of his head, pulling him close until the swell of fear begins to dim.

Carefully, I coax him to the couch, pulling the blanket up and over him. I sit beside him, continuing to ease my fingers through his hair, and finally he begins to fall to slumber. “He ain't well, 'Ro.”

“I can see that.” She never thought that she'd see Scott Summers cower in a corner, or curl up like a child under his mother's arm. She's good enough that she doesn't ask for all the details, just the general understanding of how the Phoenix blew his mind in half and sent him falling into the cracks. She guesses that the memories were traumatic, and lets the conversation move on into more comfortable areas after that. She talks of the abundance of students, how they are excited about their ability to change the world. “We could have approached him differently. While at war with Inhumans, I thought about that a great deal. I faced a lot hard decisions, not as many he did, but I now realize how quickly we turned our backs on him for making those decisions.”

I don't tell her of my own guilt, but she still senses it. A hand upon my shoulder, her voice floats into the silence like the scent of jasmine – soft, sweet, yearned for in its beauty. “He trusts you, Logan. Perhaps more than he trusts anyone.” A close lipped smile, just warm enough to melt me, she promises to keep our secret and to check in on us every so often.

His mind was a swarm with fever, burning holes into his thoughts. The pain in his chest from trying to breathe. His leg broken. His wrist. The hunger in his stomach, the way his very skin felt covered in lightning, and his blood felt like ice withing his veins.

He couldn't remember his mother's face, or her voice, the way she smelled. He could remember the hem of her pants, how the material folded over her black high heels. He could remember her hands at they mussed his hair, and he knew that she had called him a good boy, though he couldn't hear the words. He could remember smiling, loving his mother with all his heart.

The light hurt his half-lidded eyes. Shot in through red lenses, ripping his synapses even further apart. He remembered the feeling of weightlessness, and then the feel of someone's arms around his shoulders. He struggled – in his fog – against the hands that tousled through his hair and picked the maggots from open sores. He struggled and fought, but to no avail. He wasn't strong enough to fight back. Not now, not ever.

The warmth of water enveloped him, and again he pushed and pulled at those who held him. Kicked and gnashed until they poured the water over his head. An ecstasy, his mother's hands upon his head, flushing back water from his eyes.

“I think he likes it. Do it again.”

For a moment, he thought he heard his mother's laugh, that phantom of need that he'd longed for for so long now. Hands within his hair, tender fingers in soft slow circles, Scott Summers cried for the first time in years. He missed his mother. Wanted to see her again so sadly so that he could remember what she looked like. And when those hands cradled him, he found himself drowsy, tired from his dreams.

“Why don't you take off his glasses?”

“We were told not to.”
“Seems a bit dumb--”

“Remy.”

Remy watched as Bastien and Adelie filled a syringe with clear liquid. “Hold him down,” Bastien said, injecting the first medicine into the boy's arm. It was strange to him, how young the boy looked. According to his brother, they were the same age, but the boy was half his height, and skinny. He wondered about the bottles of medicine, the sores, the chains, the glasses. So many things made this boy strange, but what made him most curious was how the Valiquets reacted to him.

“Oh,” Adelei cooed, swishing wet autumn hair back from the boy's forehead. “I know it hurts, baby, but it's gonna make you feel better. Promise.”

Bastien had the most medical expertise in the Guild, unless you considered the grannies and their dried up old witch herbs. He'd attended medical school, got busted for forging prescriptions, kicked out his final year. His room was filled with medical books, and he always knew what you needed just by looking at you. Remy LeBeau liked Bastien, but his brother didn't. Jean-Paul sighed and shook his head, fed up with the baby-talk they were giving the kid. “If I talked to Remy like that, kid'd be knee deep in debt to the Guild, 'stead of risin' to the top.”

“I wonder if he'll take some broth,” Adelie mused, reminding her husband that they could get a few cans from the store up the road. Bastien cautioned her to wait until the medicine had time to work. In the meantime, he wrapped the broken bones, casting them with long steel sticks and gauze, the best he could do without proper means. But, he didn't think the boy would move around too much, considering he was so close to death.

The feeling of warmth as he was held, gentle fingers smooth against his face. He tried to get away at first, to flee the touch, but whoever held him persisted, lulling him into sleep soft circles upon his jaw.

He wakes, his mind still half taken by memories. He welcomes the touch as I stroke his jaw and smooth his brow. Sighs and quiet sobs of relief as he falls back into the incomplete memory to experience being saved again.
He stares through the window at the crashing waves, his face looking near serene and calm, save for the flicker of autumn brow. He's been silent now for three days, the Phoenix' torrent finally giving him a chance to rest, to recuperate. For all the good it does him.

In his hand is a notebook, and on the pages he lists those that died because of him. From Patterson to Danielle, Xavier to Jean, he has filled those pages with his weaknesses, his inabilities, and fears. Fearing that Sinister was right, that the world was better off if he were alone, he's afraid to let me come near, not wanting me to take a space in that notebook of his.

But, I'm a resilient one, especially now that the nanosentinels have cleared my bloodstream. But, it doesn't lessen his guilt. I can see the hesitancy upon his face as I pull up a chair across from him. Coffee poured, I wait with him in silence, hoping that he'll finally talk, and begin to heal. But, red gaze turns back to the ocean and the silver lift of sunrise, sparkling pastel pinks and blues over the smooth waters. "Sinister ain't gonna hurt me, Scott," I say at last, but my words fall upon deaf ears. He's lost in death, once again, staring at the bodies of those who died because of him.

I understand now why Xavier stole the memories of his childhood. Between Sinister and Winters, the child was fraught and frightened, too small, too alone to deal with the traumas on his own. And, I now understand why he thought his protege could deal with Jean as well, for Scott had already lived through it. Lived through it and then thrived after the memories were gone. To Xavier, it was a simple solution to a world-ending problem. To Scott, it was years of doubt and pain, of suspicion and distrust. He wanted to love, wanted to be loved, but he was also possessed of walls so thick that few could find their way beyond it.

At the same time, had the child been shown a modicum of love and protection, been sung to sleep instead of having his head fried like a piece of chicken, I can imagine Scott being a completely person. Perhaps not the leader of the X-men, but a quieter, calmer person with a gentle smile and no fear of people getting close. No, not the leader of the X-men. The walls he used to shield himself made it possible for him to lead, let him make the decisions that eventually stole his soul.

He takes the coffee without a thank you or even a nod of appreciation, but I don't begrudge him that. Not with the thoughts I see swarming in his head.

The argument had gone on for hours. Saving the boy or returning him to those who had abused him. Bastien argued for, Jean-Paul against, but Jean-Paul had actually met their employer, knew what he was capable of, and even Remy could see that his brother was scared.

"Two point five mill, Bast. You're really going to give that up for some kid?" The regret was immediate, hating how his words sounded once they breached the air. Dark brown eyes turned towards his brother, and his heart sunk even further. "Remy," he eked into the sudden tension, "I didn't mean it like that."

"This kid goes back, and he won't survive. You know that, Paulie. We have to tell the elders."
The next weeks proved fitful at best, with the child in and out of death's door. One minute, he was screaming about the poison in his food and the deaths of those he cared for, and the next we was so drowned with fever that he couldn't twitch a finger or take a breath without some outward mechanism of survival.

Adelie took it the worst, afraid to sleep at night in case the child forgot, once again, how to breathe. She curled the tiny thing in her arms, sang lulling melodies to keep him calm as he struggled against her arms. Bastien wrote three dozen scripts during the time, changing and adjusting antibiotics every few days, trying to find those that would finally cure the boy. Jean-Paul and Remy stole the equipment, the IV stands and monitors that Bast hooked the boy up to. Their rhythmic beep in the night kept Remy awake, and he, too, soon feared the boy would die in his sleep.

Almost a month after they found him, Scott Summers finally stirred. Nameless among his rescuers, frightened to reveal himself, he attempted to sit up in the bed and failed, falling back against stolen pillows in a heap of bones and dry skin. He gnashed his teeth against his healers, fought to remove the tubes from his veins, but in the end, his fight was futile. He was too tired, too brittle to win.

Adi had long been known for the heart on her sleeve, and as she watched Bastien tape the boy's wrist from another broken bone, she cried. She blamed Jean-Paul for hiding the information. She blamed Bastien for letting the child suffer. She blamed Remy for not being a friend to the young boy. In her temper, she left the cabin, but returned some hours later with armfuls of clothes to dress the child in.

He'd been wearing Remy's clothes. T-shirts far too long and wide for the boy's meager frame. Sweatpants that they'd dug from the closet. Socks five times too big. He was too small, too sick for the clothes they'd placed upon his naked body, and it was high time they gave him clothes he could wear. A thick sweater to guard against the cold. Beige slacks that hung loose upon his skinny legs. A bow tie hung loosely around his neck. The smartest outfit she could steal.

“He looks like a nerd,” Remy remarked, “especially with those glasses.”

The hand across his face was unexpected. Adi had never hit him before. Never lashed out in anger. She regretted herself immediately, pulling Remy LeBeau against her chest, holding him tight until his the shocked patter of his heart began to slow. She apologized again and again, whispering in his ear that she was sorry. “I didn't mean to. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that.”

It took the Valiquets days to convince the boy that the food was not poisoned. Days more to convince him that no one was going to hurt him or them or anyone else so long as they were around. His confusion was divine, the small flecks of emotion playing upon his lips and brow. Relief and distrust; hope and fear. On his child's face, they became the signs of his words, as the child refused to speak.

Not until the feast, when his stomach growled so loud that it could no longer be ignored, did he offer his appreciation. Held under arms by Bastien, the child stumbled to the table to behold the wealth of food set out before him. Chicken and rice, shrimp and beans, gumbos and desserts. His stomach answered loudly the wonders of smells and enticements, but he was too weak, still, to eat on his own. Bastien held the boy's arm, lifting it to his mouth so the malnourished muscles could work to get their food. It didn't take long, after that, for the boy to grow tired of the movement. Fifteen minutes and his head lolled forward in a bout of sleepiness. Bastien pulled his head against his shoulder, soothing the boy's hair back from lenses, and kept him upright through the rest of the meal.

Slowly, the boy's walls began to melt. He found himself laughing when the youngest of them won the poker pot from those who professed to be masters. He snuggled against Adelie during the night, letting her sing him to sleep, and didn't argue when Bastien dipped him into the bath.
They called him Toby. A name that made him quake as it belonged to a boy he'd failed to save, but he feared to tell them his real name. Feared what would happen if they linked him to the orphanage and the pale man that still haunted his dreams. He worried that they would find out who he was, the strange things he could do, and so suffered the name with as much courage as he could muster.

What seemed like years to him – the joy of their company, and their endless ways to make him smile – was in truth only weeks. For the first time in memory, the boy felt safe and loved, felt as if he belonged within the world instead of too dangerous to be a part of it.

He liked to watch their training, their faux brawls out in the backyard where the bodies of the dead had all been burned. Jean-Paul and Bastien danced around each other looking for openings and weaknesses while Remy provided the commentary. Remy was a good fighter on his own, but not nearly as adept as his brother or Bastien. He explained the different holds, how they protected themselves, how strong they were. “You don't have to worry, homme. They'll keep you safe.”

As Scott grew stronger, he dreamed of days when they would take him in. Take him back to the swamps, back to the rows of antique houses and the swells of jazz, back to anything other than the hell he'd woken up in six years ago. In his child's mind, they were the strongest people he'd ever met. He began to imagine their homes, their families, to imagine himself gathered in their enclave listening to meetings and taking on contracts.

Sometimes in the night, he would hear the quiet conversations between Adelei and Bastien. Whispers of how she could not have a child of her own, how sweet the boy was, how much he needed them. They would curl up beside him, their arms wrapped around his shoulders, and coax him into sleep with stories and melodies, and his heart would hope more than he realized it could.

Weeks passed, and the boy they called Toby became a happy, cheerful child filled with the determination to be stronger, to be better, to earn the love he so desperately craved.

A dinner, a celebration the day his casts came off and the boy was declared in perfect health. Scott snuggled himself to the counter trying to help Adi prepare the bird for a scrumptious feast. He sprinkled the skin with spices and helped her stuff the turkey with bread and seasonings, and then helped her mash the potatoes. It was an exciting time for him, the knowledge that he was well, that they were going to take him away from all of this. The place settings gave him pause. Seven instead of five. Guests were coming, and seeing his worry, Adi was quick to soothe him. “No one's going to hurt you, petit. Not as long you're with us, okay?” Red lenses focused on wide blue eyes, and with a soft smile, he nodded. He would trust her. He would trust them all.

Dinner ready, the smells making his stomach tumble in his skinny frame, Scott could barely wait to dig in. The guests were thirty minutes late and the food was getting cold, so they sat down to partake of the bounty. Spirits were high and delighted. Stories were told of New Orleans, how grand it was, how fun. They talked of the narrow streets filled with people, how one could spend a lifetime watching the crowds and never get bored. They talked of the Bayou, how friends were family and family was life. How pleased the elders would be now that the job was finished, and how they were sure the child would hold a place among them. Scott took deep breaths and smiled, enamored with the dreams that swam within his thoughts. He couldn't remember a time when he felt so happy.

The knock on the door came about an hour in with the Valiquets promptly going to answer it. Remy continued his tale of charming beignets out of the local baker, how she'd give him a dozen each time he stopped by, and he would eat them on the riverbank as he watched the fishermen bring in the hauls.
But, it all came crashing with three little words. “My, you've grown.” The voice peeled through sunshine dreams, quaked against the lush thoughts of the Bayou, and carved sudden fear into what was once love. Scott looked up to find both Sinister and Jack Winters standing at the dinner table.

In his head, the pale man reminded him of those long ago words. “Will you ever learn, Scott? You're better off alone.”

Scott remained silent for the rest of the meal, both humiliated and angry that he'd been fooled yet again. And, when Adi brought up taking the child in, Scott's nerves washed with fear. He wanted to yell, scream at them to run, to escape while they could, but as was common in the pale man's presence, his actions were not his own. Words trapped, he noticed the small flask in Sinister's hand, the drops poured into the wine that would end their contract. Like Patterson and Dani, the Bogarts and the Williamson, Ms. Hanover and Mr. Hanowitz, he was going to kill them for becoming too attached to the boy.

Breath fast, his head reeling with don't-do-this-please, his tiny hands grabbed the wine and drank it down before Bastien's hand could grab it. Sinister laughed as the boy fell to the floor in sudden pain. His veins burned, his stomach heaved, his eyes fell to darkness.

It was sometime later that night, chained back to the wall, and the scent of blood thick in the air that Sinister woke him. “You should be thanking me, boy,” he said quietly in the dark. “You would have only weighed them down. You don't have the makings of a thief.” Red gaze fell upon the corpses of the Valiquets – heartless, now, their blood spilling out on rough wooden boards. Their deaths had been painful, and for nothing more than taking pity on a child. “Did you really think I would let you go so easily? You can run all you want Mr. Summers, but you belong to me no matter where you go. Remember that. You are mine and mine alone. Seeking succor from others will only see them come to harm. You are better off alone.”

Scott sips the dregs of his coffee and winces at the bitterness. He's afraid for me, for my life, my happiness. That here I'm wasted on a worthless thing when the world needs me more than ever. He wants me to run, to escape before he comes to destroy me, too. “Don't feel sorry for me. Consider it karma. Paying for my sins.”

“What sins do you think you're paying for, Slim?”

“I killed Xavier, Kurt, Jean, my own son. I broke your trust, and the trust of everyone under my command. I burned the world, Logan. Sinister was right. I was meant to be alone.” His voice is pale, his face still. Not a twitch or grit, or anything to show that he's fighting this. But, then, I don't blame him. For a year now I've watched his parade of memories, how everything good in his life was ripped away. How he shoulders the blame for everything; how in his head, the strategies continue to wind away, showing him how simple it was to fix it all. It wouldn't have cost much, just his life, a life he was too stubborn to end. From Jean to Xavier, the wide blue eyes of Adi to the almond green of Dani, he could have saved them all had he just given up. He swallows hard, but he doesn't cry.

“It wasn't supposed to be your burden alone, Cyke.” I grab his hand, the first time he's let me touch him in who knows how long. I'm sure he's staring at it, the way my fingers twine within his, memorizing the pressure of my palm against his own. He swallows again, unsure and afraid. “I should've been there to help you carry it.”

Breath stops as I touch his cheek, smooth across eyebrows with thumb. He swallows again, his jaw beginning to shake. The memories cascade out like fresh wounds and blood, stinging across his thoughts. He wants and doesn't want, needs and wishes he didn't. “I love you, Scott Summers.”

Something inside him breaks.
The tears that come are warm and they break my heart in their constant stream. He fights me at first, tries to pull back from my arms, but I'm stronger than he is. Giving in, he collapses his head upon my shoulder, falls to floor with his knees wrapped up underneath him. For hours, he cries. Soft, wrenching sobs that rip baritone in half, chokes his breath, and quakes across his sturdy frame. He cries for me, his friends, his family, and finally, for himself. He cries for the loss, the pain, the nightmares. For the shadows that still scour his waking thoughts, for the betrayals that he's endured, and the madmen that sought to destroy him.

He cries for Jean – that he couldn't save her and that she caused him so much pain. For Xavier's death and that he took the boy's memories and twisted him into knots because he'd always known something was wrong. He regrets the night he drove me away, and worse the day I left. He wants me to hate him, to leave him, so that I'll be safe from those that would kill me just to hurt him. He wants me to love him, because with all his heart, he loves me more than himself. “I can't-- I can't--” he sobs, his voice so broken by his sadness, his chest heaving in spurts and stops. Exhausted, he tries to pull away again, but I only draw him closer.

It's hard to watch someone like Scotty cry. To watch that wall break in half and his sadness flood the room. He finally falls to sleep against my shoulder. Falls into dreams that are silent for the first time in months. He dreams of halcyon days. Bright green fields and plenty of fish. A small boat and fishing rods. How lazy he feels with his pole in the water, how light he feels when he looks at me. A beer or two, a couple of caught fish, and we laugh in unison at some story come down through blue sky and wonder. I wait for the tragedy of the dream, and the tragedy does come, as always. A shot to the head, and my body falls. An errant hunter looking for dear. He cries for me, in his dream, wails and sobs until he wakes himself up. But he doesn't scream, doesn't shock, just wakes and rolls over, presses himself into my chest a little harder and goes back to sleep.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

The end

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sun shines down on silver water that sips the shore with springtime warmth. Feet dipped to calves, he lays back and lets the sun warm him from the outside in.

He hasn't aged a day in ten years.

Reed Richards said the Phoenix did more than give Scott back his memories, but also blessed him with a healing factor. “Perhaps,” he explained, “the Phoenix came not just to restore the mutants, but Scott Summers as well.” He mentioned something about a long and joyous life together, how he hoped for the best for both of us, before sending me on my way.

Scotty still gets the seizures, but they're not as rough as before. Two or three times a week instead of days spent in their heaves. In a way, it's a good thing, as it stops 'Ro from asking him to lead the team again. It's bad enough he spends his time designing their training scenarios, but honest to beer, I don't want him fighting again. And, being that he's Scott Summers, he would do it if asked, feel that it was his obligation.

Me, however, I've gone back. A part-time member, as I like to remind Kitty. A mission here, a mission there. Gives me something to talk about with Scott when I get home. And, in a way, I think he needs the privacy sometimes; a bit of time alone to let all the shit settle in his veins.

He's taken up gardening and carpentry, two things that keep his time and makes me proud. We became self-sufficient a few years ago, and Kitty's employed his techniques at the school, making it self-sufficient as well. His world is quiet now, calm. No more life and death, no more decisions that rip him in two. And for the first time since I've known him, he's actually happy.

Asleep – his hands folded under head and his skin warmed to relaxation – he doesn't notice me at first. As I touch fingers to jaw, he smiles, his red gaze upward, his actions sleepy. “I've missed you,” he says, letting me tread across his hair.

“I've missed you, too.” A kiss to the forehead, and I lay down beside him, letting hands idle over his chest. Sun-soaked and shirtless, he moans quietly at the soft circles I draw upon him.

“I've really missed you,” he says with a laugh, pulling up to catch my mouth in an appreciative kiss. He grabs my lips within his own, sucking on mutual need while his hand finds plunder on the back of my neck, twisting into tendrils to grab the moans from my chest.

I tell him of the outside world, the Hellfire Club and Blob. The school and its new students, and Emma's shoe collection that she was far too excited to show me. “Rachel's coming by tomorrow,” I tell him, just so he's ready and prepared. Rachel, more than Nathan, worries for his mental state and makes him feel guilty. “She wants to see the garden.”
We move onto other things, his days of fishing, the new chairs that he's finished. How he put the finish on them with his eye beams alone. He tells me that he talked to Emma two days ago, that my whiskey would arrive right on time, and that she'll probably show up by the end of the week to make sure that we're still okay.

I tell him of Storm, how Kurt finally proposed, and the two are now happily planning a wedding. “They want you to come, if you can.”

“But, I'm still dead.”

“Then you'll just say you got better.” I watch his face for the tell-tale signs of nervousness. The thought of going back, of seeing them all again is something that fills him with dread. “They ain't gonna ask you to fight, Scott. 'Sides, I wouldn't let you if they did.”

He appreciates this, the control. The giving in. He appreciates that he doesn't make the hard decisions, that he's not called upon to sacrifice. Scott enjoys his life here. Though solitary at times, it gives him room to breathe, something he's never had before.

We grab our fishing poles after lunch, head out onto the water in our little boat, and sit in splendid silence. We don't need words here, just the time. Our time spent waiting on the fish to bite, my head against his shoulder, our fingers intertwined. It's all he wants – this time together – and were the world a peaceful place, it's all I'd want, too.

Fish over fire, his kisses are soft and taste of smoke and poplar. The evenings are chilly on our little island, pecking his skin with goosebumps, and his hands up under my shirt. I worry about him in these moments – that any second his nightmares and shadows will come crashing down and he'll succumb, which happens often – but his mind is clear right now, focused, interested. He moans when I deepen the kiss, dip him back onto old maple log so that his body bowed and ready for my ministrations.

Under firelight, he is beautiful, his sun washed skin kissed with orange and wonder. His skin still tastes of the ocean, slight hints of salt breeze and the faint traces of soap. There is no fear as he lifts off my shirt that he can more freely touch and feel the warmth of my skin. No fear as I tug at his jeans, help him kick them off onto the pile of firewood at the side. He rolls me over onto my back, stuck grass and summer leaves in his hair, and works upon my own pants, fumbling with the zipper until I'm free.

Almost frantic -his mind filled with thoughts of lust and need - he delves into my mouth again, climbing so deep inside that I can feel the blood upon my lip. A dangerous territory – for both of us. Gently I coax him back, my hand upon his cheek, and flutter soft kisses across his face. His lips, his nose, his jaw. His ear. He presses into my lips upon his pulse, his neurons delighted and hot with the whorl of pressure, his breath staggered and heavy.

“Oh, I missed you,” he breathes as I caress my lips down his neck and over the now taut muscles of his shoulders. At the crook of his neck, just wear muscles bend, I nick my teeth into flesh, getting a deep-chested moan in response.

Back to lips, I lay him down upon the ground, tugging off his underwear and my own. I grind my hips between his own, an unconscious motion as our tongues tangle in our desperate need for time. A break, and down his chest, rubbing warmth into air-chilled muscles, and make my way towards the building heat below. He juts forward as I take him into my mouth, his hips thrusting up in want. I hold him to the ground, sucking him hard as I work damp fingers into his tightness.

He squirms at the touch, clenching body and teeth. A soothing hand upon his stomach and the
distraction of my mouth upon him eases him once again. One finger, two, and I graze his prostrate which bucks him up again, nearly throwing me off balance. “I missed you too, babe,” I say before angling him for entry.

It's a beautiful think, a Summers in want, and I take the moment to appreciate for his hips begin to protest my week long absence.

His legs around my torso, my hands upon his hips, I slowly press into him. His voice scatters as he stretches around my length, his eyes closed under crooked glasses, his head rolls back and chest forward as I find his favorite spot once again. In, in until he's taken me at full, his voice solid and rapturous.

My thrusts are slow at first, careful, more for myself than him. At this point, for he's so lost in the feeling of me inside him, that it will take him hours to crawl out. But, I've still got a beast inside of me, and he lacks the defenses to guard against it. A measured pace, timed to the beat of my heart, a slow ease into ecstasy.

I flow into him then, our bodies moving in tandem. I take his mouth, consuming vanilla and lust, drinking it down with laps against his teeth and tongue and lips. One hand braced in good, cool earth, the other wrapped tightly in my hair, he calls my name as pleasure builds, his body bent backwards to meet my demand.

We revel in each other – the warm sheen of thrusts, the fullness, the tightness. Dazed by the scent of jungle and sweet, my pace becomes more needful and the voice erupting from his chest a song that spurs me forwards.

By ash and flame, we collapse against each other, on our sides, we roll, and begin the chase again. My arms around his chest, devouring his neck, he grips my ass tightly, digging in with fingernails, and hisses at the touch of my teeth. “Logan,” he says again, his voice on the edge of star set and burst. I can feel his body begin to tremble and give way, to lose himself behind the white desire caught behind closed eyes.

I hurry my pace even more, driving into him with urgency. Faster and harder until I too feel the sudden rush of stars. We come together, a single release of utopia, called out under the beauty of northern lights. His head back against my shoulder, my lips still upon his neck, we melt together, press ourselves front to back, wrapped up inside of the world that we’ve both come to need more than anything.

I tell him that I love him.

We watch the lazy water lap against the shoreline of our tiny island. More warmth from each other than the dying flames of our fire, he yawns and presses back into me, gripping for his discarded shirt to lay over top of us.

“I love you, too,” he whispers, wrapping his hand around mine. A tender kiss, and he places it over his heart. “I always will.”

Chapter End Notes
Hope the ride was enjoyable. Comments and kudos appreciated, and thank you very much for reading.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!