Shalott
by Sand3

Summary

Daken has accepted a sanctuary agreement and is living at the Xavier Institute and hopefully being rehabilitated. But interpersonal drama is running high, and tempers are running short, as tension, frustration and arguments between himself and Bobby become a constant backdrop. With a little more effort to communicate that starts to change, but is there a little too much baggage to make this journey?

Not always in order but all the same narrative. This is a slow-burn with plenty of angst.

Notes

The Mature rating is not just there to signal you that there might be smut in this fic (not just). This story deals with mature topics and explores dark themes. If you came here through the Daken tag, then you probably know to expect abuse/child-abuse as a reoccurring theme in the character's backstory. If you came here through one of the other tags, then, y'know, that.

Content Warnings for This Story:
- Discussion about consent, questions of questionability
- Depictions and discussion of self-harm and suicidal thoughts
- Depictions and discussion of violence against others
- Depictions of injury
- Discussion of extreme physical abuse
- Discussion of sexual abuse/prostitution
- Discussion of psychological abuse/conditioning
- Discussion and references to abusive relationships
- Discussion and depictions of self-destructive behavior
- Depictions of depression and altered psychological states
- Depictions of PTSD and triggering
- Victim-blaming dialogue
Johnny goes to the neighbors for a cup of sugar.

There were exactly two large mansions full of super heroes on Central Park. They were neighbors. The park was their neighborhood. And as neighbors, they didn't need global catastrophes or excuses to visit each other. And Johnny didn't need Rogue to hold his hand and take him over to visit the neighbors. Because he was a grown damn man and he could go visit a neighbor all on his own and without an excuse.

Johnny wished Rogue was with him as he started trying to come up with excuses.

He touched down just outside of the school's perimeter and walked onto the grounds, unsure whether coming in under power would set off the defense system. Nothing happened as he stepped onto X-controlled land, so apparently he hadn't offended the security net. There were teenagers dotted around, sitting in the grass or playing frisbee. Johnny didn't know any of the younger kids, but he recognized some of the college ones. As he made his way up the main walk, he spotted one of the mini-Emmas sitting on the front steps talking to a crystal girl he only sort of recognized.

“Hey, Stepford right?” he called as he reached the building.

She glanced up and raised an eyebrow at him. “Easy. Which one?” she challenged.

He’d known that they started cutting and dying their hair to look different a while ago, but he wasn't sure he'd ever known their first-names. This was the one with bobbed, black hair. “Buttercup,” Johnny said firmly.

The girl twisted her lips to the side and fought a grin for a second or two before shrugging and rolling her eyes. “I guess I'm going to have to give you that one,” she admitted.

“So is there a desk I should check in at? Do I need a visitor badge or something?” Johnny asked.

The Buttercup's cheek wrinkled and she gave him a look. “Everybody knows who you are,” she said.

“Yeah, but, I don't wanna just...” he shrugged.

“It's fine. Whatever.” She shook her head. “Daken's room is in with the staff dorms on the third floor, east wing. Number eight. There's also a teachers' patio at the end of that hall that's theoretically off-limits to students,” she said, looking back up at Johnny. “He leaves campus a lot though. He might not be here.”

Johnny frowned down at her while she spoke and then sighed when she was done and tilted his head. “You know that's creepy right? It creeps people out.”

“I know,” Buttercup agreed.

Johnny gave a soft, amused huff and rolled his eyes. “Fair enough. Thanks!” he tossed over his shoulder as he climbed the steps and entered the building. He made his way up to the third floor and into the hallway with the staff dorms. Quickly locating number eight, he knocked and waited a few seconds, then pressed his ear to the door. Nothing. But if Daken was inside and didn't want to be disturbed, he wouldn't have made any sound normal human ears could pick up anyway. Johnny
pursed his lips and stepped away, turning to continue on to the end of the hall and the deck Buttercup had described.

The patio area was furnished with benches and lounge chairs and a couple of lattice-top deck tables, but it seemed to be deserted when Johnny stepped out onto it and his heart sank for a moment before jumping into his throat as a voice called, “Johnny?” He whipped around to find Daken sitting on the parapet, leaned against the side of the building, looking right back at him.

“Daken-- Hi,” Johnny said awkwardly, walking toward him, feeling just a little stiff and clumsy.

Daken set down a book he'd apparently been reading and got up, meeting Johnny halfway. He was wearing sunglasses, presumably to reduce the glare off the pages of a book read in direct sunlight. Or just because he looked so bad-ass in his designer shades. “What are you doing here?” he asked, a small frown on his lips.

“... I came to see you,” Johnny answered. As they stopped in front of each other, he carefully caught the frames of Daken's sunglasses, pulling them off so he could look into his eyes. “... You look amazing,” Johnny whispered.

Besides amazing, Daken also looked worried. He reached up and cupped Johnny's cheek. “You look tired,” he responded.

“That bad, huh?” Johnny asked, folding Daken's sunglasses.

“Yes,” Daken nodded. “Do--”

Johnny cut him off by catching a hand around the back of Daken's neck and pressing their lips together. Daken tilted into the kiss and opened his mouth to let Johnny in, sighing softly and resting his hands on Johnny's waist. When they broke it was by bare inches, and Johnny leaned his forehead against Daken's. “Are you here now? Are you done playing 'villain'?”

“Don't be condescending, Johnny. It looks stupid on you,” Daken said, a hint of irritation in his voice.

“And 'villain' looks stupid on you,” Johnny retorted.

“... I can't argue with that,” Daken admitted, more than just a hint of dejection there now.

“No more stupid games,” Johnny said, combing his fingers through the hair at the back of Daken's head. He stole two more quick kisses. “I love you. We can--”

“Johnny,” Daken cut him off, digging his fingers into Johnny's sides just hard enough to grab his attention. “... Somebody stuck a sign to your back that says 'use me';” he whispered.

“... Yeah, I figured it must be something like that,” Johnny agreed.

Daken relaxed his fingers, hands gently hanging onto Johnny as he leaned away enough to look into his eyes. “... I'd take you for all you're worth,” he said sadly.

“I'd let you,” Johnny said without hesitation.

“I know,” Daken nodded and then closed his eyes and shook his head. “I don't want to. But I would. I've been drinking poison for decades, and you beg to be taken advantage of...”

“We can make it work,” Johnny protested, wrapping his arms around Daken's shoulders and
pulling him into a tight hug.

“... I don't think we can,” Daken said, voice uncharacteristically fragile. “Neither of us knows how to say 'no'.

“We can learn together,” Johnny insisted.

“I don't think we can,” Daken said again. “We're co-enablers, Johnny, we established that much before. Trying to 'make it work' would be legitimately suicidal.”

“I love you,” Johnny said again. It hurt. He hated this kind of pain more than any other.

“That's not enough. That’s a currency with no value, just shine,” Daken said, shaking his head just slightly. He didn't try to pull away. He kept his arms around Johnny's waist. For that much, Johnny was grateful.

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“Well obviously it's a direct reference, nobody was trying to hide that, but the tone is completely different,” Bobby was arguing as he gestured vaguely with the mostly empty smoothie cup in his hand. ‘Bill and Ted' is omaĝe though, not 'derivative'. C'mon, man.”

“It's about time-travel,” Kitty protested, stirring her straw around, trying to dislodge a chunk blocking it.

“Of course it's about time-travel. See: omaģe,” Bobby retorted. “The difference is in the tone. 'Bill and Ted' is one hundred percent ridiculous, spoofy camp.”

“‘Doctor Who’ is ridiculous too,” Kitty pointed out, side-eyeing him.

“In a completely different way! Tone,” Bobby shook his head firmly.

“You're splitting hairs, and I'm not sure it's merited,” Kitty grimaced and sighed as they arrived back at the school with still a little over an hour before dinner time.

“Johnny Storm is here,” Jia announced, glancing up at them from where she was sitting on the steps with Mindee, doing some kind of weird finger-weaving thing with three different colors of yarn.


“Looking for Daken,” Mindee replied, pinching a few strands that Jia was holding taught and pulling them through loops of other strands. “I told him the room number and to check the balcony.”

“Oh crap!” Kitty swore and started charging up the stairs.

“I think you're jumping to erroneous conclusions!” Mindee called after her, but Kitty was already through the doors and Bobby chased after her, leaving the two girls to continue their crafts on the steps.

“Kitty, why 'crap'?” Bobby asked, catching up with her and pacing as she kept hurrying toward the staff wing.

“I was trying to think why Johnny would have any interest in Daken, he wasn't even part of Unity when they fought him, and then I remembered: Daken blew up part of the Baxter Building in his
“Kitty, I don't freak out. Johnny's not a revenge kind of guy,” Bobby said, continuing to chase along next to her while Kitty trotted down the hall. “Besides, people blow up parts of the Baxter Building every other month.”

“Johnny's family's been missing for a year. They've been legally declared dead. His *entire family.* And now we've just given asylum to somebody who once *attacked* his family?” Kitty pointed out, stress thick in her voice. “If I was Johnny, I'd go find the guy and punch him.”

Bobby grabbed the door to the patio and pulled it open a few seconds after Kitty had phased through it. He came out onto the deck as she was skidding to a stop in front of him, back arching and arms hooking up slightly in surprise. And the sight was a pretty stark contrast to Kitty's previously stated concerns. Johnny and Daken were on a bench facing out into the park, arms curled around each other. Johnny's head was on Daken's shoulder; Daken was twisting, looking back at Kitty and Bobby, eyes narrowing into a mild glare.

The murmur of Johnny's voice paused and he lifted his head, turning to glance at them. “... Hey guys,” he said mildly. “Did I break some security protocols? Buttercup said to just walk in.”

“Hey, you're fine,” Kitty replied immediately. “Sorry to interrupt.” She turned sharply, grabbing Bobby's arm as she strode past him and dragging them both back through the door without opening it.

Bobby started to resist for a second or two, before questioning why he wanted to and then shoving that thought away again. “W-what-- Why are we--” he started to stammer. “What the *hell?* Kitty, why are you just--”

“Just *what?* Letting them continue their obviously private conversation?” Kitty looked up at him, frowning.

“That patio's a *public* space! If they're going to have a *private conversation*, they should--” Bobby tried to protest.

“So *Now* who's freaking out?” Kitty demanded, eyeing him. “What's *your* problem?”

“I just-- I don't have a problem, I'm just saying it's not--”

“Did you *notice* that Johnny's been crying?” Kitty asked.

That stopped Bobby dead in his tracks. He hadn't noticed. He'd been distracted by how thoroughly Johnny and Daken were melted against each other. It shouldn't bother him. He had no good reason to be bothered by that. There was nothing to be jealous of. “I- I didn't,” he admitted softly.

“So, you win, Johnny did not come storming over here to avenge some bricks,” Kitty said. She took a deep breath and ran a hand through her hair. “Apparently Daken has friends. Or friend, anyway. Who knew.” She shook her head and started walking again. “So I'm just going to stay away from the patio tonight, because crying goes somewhere in my top five for awkward things to walk in on,” she decided.

“Right. Good call,” Bobby agreed distractedly, glancing back over his shoulder at the door before following after Kitty once more.
So I guess I get that they don't want to muddy up the separate franchises too much outside of crossover events, but it feels weird to me that Avengers and X-Men aren't regularly wandering back and forth between the two mansions or, like, doing morning jogs together. They're both on the park now (well, Avengers Mansion is just across 5th from the park anyway). I feel like there should just be a lot of casual hanging out these days because it's so convenient. As I was working on this drabble I started trying to work out their exact proximity to each other and I can't remember if it's been stated exactly where in the park they put down the Institute. Was that addressed? Does anybody know?
Daken slams doors.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He had a prep-period after homeroom this term, and Bobby had quickly fallen in love with the schedule because it was the ideal time to go make a second cup of coffee. Today when he opened the door to the staff lounge, it was already filled with the rich smell. Daken had a drained french-press sitting on the table next to him and one hand curled around a cup. He glanced up only momentarily before returning to the book he was reading.

Bobby faltered in his stride for a moment before propelling himself into the room with forced casualness. He went to the cabinet above the Keurig and pulled out his box of cartridge.

“Those are terrible for the environment,” Daken drawled. “They're even illegal in some countries, you know.”

Bobby glanced over his shoulder. “Are you an environmentalist now?”

“I have to live on this planet,” Daken replied.

Bobby rolled his eyes and huffed, loading a cartridge into the Keurig and pressing the button. “So, what's going on with Johnny?” he asked.

“I am baffled why you would think that's any of your business,” Daken said.

“Can't even pretend to be nice, can you?”

“I can pretend to be anything,” Daken retorted. “And now I'm wondering how it is that failing to gossip about someone I care for makes me a bad person.”

“Someone you care for, huh? That must put him on a pretty short list,” Bobby noted, leaning against the counter as the coffee dripped into his cup. “So how long have you two been friends?”

Daken sighed dramatically and dropped his book on the table. “Since I was spying on Osborn for the Fantastics,” he replied, putting an elbow on the table and leaning on it.

“Oh you were not,” Bobby snorted.

“Really?” Daken side-eyed him and raised a brow. “You think I wouldn't take Osborn's money and sell him out at the same time? The man was and is utterly despicable. I revealed in sabotaging from within.”

That actually made perfect sense. “Fine,” Bobby relented as he picked up his cup and walked over to the table, dropping into the chair across from Daken. “So, what, you just made best-buddies with the F.F. and nobody noticed?”

“Hardly saw the rest of them, for the most part,” Daken shrugged, eyeing Bobby with disconcerting scrutiny. “I'd meet up with Johnny to pass off whatever intelligence I'd managed to gather... Dance clubs were a good place to lose a tail if and when Osborn tried to put one on me, and Johnny was a well known club-kid.”

“Practical,” Bobby noted an took a sip of his coffee.
“It was, at first,” Daken semi-agreed, tilting his head and going a bit distant. “But we started meeting more and more often. We got sloppy, and frankly it's amazing we weren't caught. Speaks to the general incompetence of 'HAMMER', I suppose.” He shook his head and took a sip of his coffee. “Certainly when it evolved into clandestine trysts in skeezy hotel rooms, somebody should have noticed.”

Bobby didn't spit-take or choke; his cup was sitting firmly on the table. He just stared for a few seconds. “Bullshit,” he spat at last.

Daken's eyes turned back to him, focused again. “What?”

“You did not sleep with Johnny,” Bobby sneered and took a big gulp of his coffee.

“Well, I don't think either of us got much sleep on those occasions,” Daken said with a soft chuckle.

“Bullshit.”

“I wonder who you're more jealous of here,” Daken said musingly, studying Bobby. “He does have such a lovely smile, doesn't he? That famous Storm charm... His sister gets all the top-billing for putting Namor around her finger, but Johnny's just as good.”

A sick, angry feeling was starting to settle in Bobby's guts, twisting his stomach and souring his mouth. “So what, Johnny's 'famous Storm charm' made you see the light and turn over a leaf and all that good stuff?” he scoffed.

Daken hummed, smirking and leaning his jaw on his loosely curled fist. “Well there lies the question, did he give me a taste of the side of righteousness or did I let him indulge his dark side?”

He closed his eyes, eyelashes laying like lace upon his cheeks. “I gave him thrills he never thought to seek.”

“So you used your powers on him,” Bobby said.

Daken's eyes snapped open. He lifted his head from its resting place against his knuckles and stared blankly at Bobby for a minute. Then he pushed back his chair and stood up, walking to the door without another word.

“Hey!” Bobby called, getting to his feet and starting after him. He caught the handle of the door just before Daken could pull it fully shut after him. “Hey!” Daken kept hold, resisting for a moment as Bobby tried to pull it back open, before shoving suddenly enough to catch Bobby off guard and send him sprawling backwards, tripping, falling and clipping his head on the chair he'd just abandoned with a loud curse.

By the time he'd regained equilibrium and made his way back to the door, Daken was already long gone.

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Traversing the park had been made excessively aggravating by the fact that it was a nice day and so joggers and nannies with preschoolers were out and clogging the paths and greens. With the irritating sounds of wholesome mirth still finding their way to Daken's ears, he crossed fifth and stopped in front of Avengers Mansion. He paused for a moment; there were a dozen reasons for anxiety to be shredding his stomach lining. Then he closed his eyes and shook his head, squaring himself, and pulled the phone from his pocket.
After the third ring, Daken bit down hard on his tongue, anxiety turning up a notch, but halfway through the fourth it picked up. “Hey. Hey, man, what's up?” Johnny sounded slightly flustered.

“Are you busy?” Daken asked.

“I, um, I can--”

“It's fine,” Daken said, turning sharply away from the gates, feeling like an idiot.

“Nononono wait! I was just going to say I'll need to clean up before I can meet you somewhere,” Johnny protested.

“... I'm at the gate,” Daken said.

“You're--? You're here? You're at the mansion?” Johnny sounded startled. “Hang on, I'll be right there!”

The line cut off before Daken could tell him not to bother, and Daken cursed softly and bit his lip. This was stupid. He shouldn't have come here. This was stupid. He kept letting Drake get under his skin. The man was an ass-hole, and Daken shouldn't let his stupid ideas bother him. But here he was.

Minutes ground painfully by until he heard feet running across the path inside, and the gates finally slid back to reveal Johnny bridging the last few meters. He was wearing a very grubby Tshirt and jeans that had seen better days. “Hey, man, come on in here before I get instagrammed in my fashion-don'ts,” he called, flashing a grin.

“You look better in your fashion-don'ts than most people look in suits,” Daken said, walking onto the grounds as the gates reversed direction behind him to shut out the curious citizenry on the other side. Johnny smelled of engine grease and sweat and... “You're hurt?”

“Just a bad pinch. It's small. No big deal,” Johnny replied dismissively, holding up a hand with a large and very dirty bandaid stuck over the base of his palm.

“That is going to get infected,” Daken sighed, taking Johnny's wrist and giving the bandaid a dubious look. “Why don't you wear gloves?”

“I do sometimes,” Johnny shrugged. “But, hey, guess I'm taking a break now, so I'll clean it up. Come on, let's go in,” he said, waving at the mansion and tugging Daken along.

Daken kept hold of Johnny and let himself be pulled into the building. Johnny went for the elegant main stairway, and as they were turning down a southern hallway, Daken saw a southern girl coming from another direction. They made eye-contact for a few seconds, and her brows pinched, but Rogue said nothing, and then she was out of sight as Johnny kept leading Daken deeper into the vipers' nest.

Johnny brought him into a rather grand suite that had clearly been furnished by a professional interior decorator with a vague 'make it nice' and an unspecified budget. “I should probably take a quick shower,” Johnny noted softly, glancing down at himself, smudged and streaked from being underneath a car.

“You don't smell offensive. It's your hand that worries me,” Daken said.

“I'll scrub down quick and then peroxide it,” Johnny assured him and started walking toward a half open door with tile visible on the other side. “You're upset. You want to come in here and talk
about it or wait 'til I'm done?"

Daken hung back, not moving, clenching his teeth and keeping his feet planted.

Johnny looked back over his shoulder. "... I'm not-- I'm not trying to be a jerk. I just... I'm filthy. I
know I stink. It's just a shower.”

"... I can wait,” Daken said quietly.

Johnny frowned, looking hurt. “Is it going to be like that from now on? Keeping me at arm's
length?”

Daken closed his eyes. “I said we're bad for each other... Being able to recognize that doesn't make
me stop wanting you, wanting to get in that shower with you.”

Johnny was quiet for awhile, one hand on the handle of the bathroom door as he leaned into it
slightly, lips pursed and brow pinched. Finally he nodded. “I'll be quick. Don't run away,” he
whispered and went inside, leaving the door ajar.

Daken settled onto a Victorian sofa and stared at the sliver of visible bathroom, listening to the
water. Telling himself it was a good decision. Breaking this off before it started again. Johnny left
him raw and wounded like nothing else. His 'death' hit Daken harder than anything had in decades.
He had to assume this was what love felt like. But love got people killed. And Daken might be just
a step shy of unkillable, but he'd absolutely get Johnny killed if they resumed the same patterns as
before. The line between reckless and self-destructive had been more than flirted with.

But maybe worse than the thought of getting Johnny killed was of becoming the next in the long
chain of of people who had used him, taken what they needed, and threw out what was left. Daken
couldn't trust himself with someone that desperate. He wouldn't make a casualty of Johnny.

Had he already?

Bile and acid curdled his stomach. Doubt had become his most constant companion in Daken's
renewed life. So much of it had been like a game. It had felt like one they were playing together,
but was that just a willful delusion? Daken had started it. Whether he counted things from the
arrow or the first kiss, either way, Daken had started it. He heard the water shut off and felt a surge
of panic, the urge to bolt, to run and not look back. Leave all of it. Leave New York. Leave that
strange, tantalizing promise of 'family' that had been dangled in front of him.

Leave the first person who had made him feel human in such a long, long time. He bit the inside of
his lip as he watched Johnny come out of the bathroom, wrapped in a robe, and make is way over
to the sofa. Damn him. Damn him. Why didn't he put on clothes? The smell of him without
cologne, aftershave, deodorant or any artificial scents beyond the lingering traces of bodywash was
bad enough. Was he doing it on purpose? No, Johnny was too guileless for that.

"Talk to me,” Johnny said, sitting down next to him. “What's wrong?”

Daken turned his head forward and stared at the carpet for a few seconds. “... Did you ever feel
morning-after regret?” he asked softly.

“What?” Johnny sounded confused and worried.

“Did you ever feel like you hadn't wanted it?”

“Daken.” Johnny's hand landed on his shoulder and the other caught gently under his jaw, turning
his head. His eyes were worried. “Daken, we talked about this. You sat me down and explained your powers to me for hours before the first time.”

“It was twenty minutes at most,” Daken corrected.

“It felt like hours,” Johnny amended and then shook his head. “Daken, you didn't push me, and I never regretted any of it,” he said very firmly and then his nose wrinkled slightly. “Except for when you told me you wished I'd stayed dead and blew up some bricks. That sucked a lot.”

“I'm sorry.” Daken glanced down and away again. Trying to hold Johnny's eyes was painful.

“You already apologized,” Johnny said quietly, worry straining his voice. “Daken, what happened? What brought this on?”

Daken closed his eyes. It was stupid. All of this was stupid. He was making a fool of himself. But what else was new. “Drake's been throwing mixed-signals at me since I met him. It's a constant push and pull, and it's annoying,” he said.

“He... likes you?” Johnny asked, a tense note entering his voice.

“No. He only wants me. There's no liking there,” Daken shook his head and sighed. “Apparently he gets jealous though. This morning he started not-subtly trying to wheedle me for the nature of our relationship, and I was irritated so I decided to tease him.”

“What did you tell him?”

“The truth.”

“Oh.” Johnny was quiet for a few seconds, processing. “What did he say?”

Daken wet his lip slowly, thinking over it. “At first he thought I was lying. Then, when he believed me, he came to a conclusion that wasn't entirely unrealistic.”

“... What.” Johnny's prompt lacked the upward lilt of a question. New tension had entered his frame, but his hand stayed gentle on Daken's shoulder.

“... He said I'd used my powers on you,” Daken answered softly.

He heard a soft click of Johnny's teeth coming together and clenching for a moment. He swallowed. His pulse picked up. His scent soured. “He's an idiot,” he whispered after a few seconds of pseudo-silence. Then his hand picked up and moved around Daken to the opposite shoulder, and the other arm circled his waist. He pulled Daken against him, then shifted the hand from shoulder to hair. “He's an idiot,” he repeated as Daken melted into him, closing his eyes again and sinking into Johnny's intoxicating scent.

“... You can't pretend that it wasn't a factor,” Daken whispered. “It's always there. It didn't matter when I was picking up strangers.” He took a stuttering breath and pressed his face against Johnny's neck. “You can't say that it didn't influence you... that it doesn't influence everyone...”

“So does the fact that you're pretty as a Stratocaster,” Johnny retorted softly. “But we don't get pissy or call foul on people for being pretty.”

“Of course 'we' do. Individuals and the media at large will call people 'whore' and 'homewrecker' just for being beautiful, regardless of their actual behavior,” Daken pointed out.
“Okay, yeah, you're right, Western culture has some serious hang-ups about sexuality and sexual-attractiveness,” Johnny conceded. “But my point was that whether somebody has the face of an angel or they smell like heaven itself (or in your case, both), it's still all falls under the umbrella of 'attractiveness'. You're not morally corrupt for being pretty.”

“No, I'm morally corrupt because I'm morally corrupt,” Daken murmured and let out a soft huff through his nose. “I've been leveraging my powers so long it's reflexive. I don't even realize I'm doing it half the time.”

“You didn't with me though.”

“Johnny--” Daken started, pained, annoyed.

“No, listen,” Johnny cut him off insistently. “If you'd pushed me outside my comfort zone with your powers, there would have been snap-back after it wore off, right?”

Daken was quiet for a moment. Johnny wasn't wrong, per say, but too simplistic, too optimistic. “… Not if you'd been adequately groomed.”

“Daken, you kissed me the third time we were even in the same building,” Johnny protested.

“Fourth. The party.”

“Fourth. Whatever. It's not like we were even within ten feet of each other for the all of five minutes I was at that 'party',” Johnny snorted. “Anyway, you and I both know that's not enough contact to 'groom' someone.”

Daken was quiet. Johnny's points were logical and valid and that should make him right. Daken's breath was still shaking and his throat felt squeezed. He wanted Johnny to be right. He swallowed. His breath made an accidental little mewl in the back of his throat. He was being pathetic. Because he'd always been pathetic, with nothing but stupid delusions of strength and control.

“Daken,” Johnny called softly, moving his hand to lift Daken's head. “You have to--”

Daken leaned forward and kissed him. Johnny started to open his mouth and then stopped, pulled away slightly, leaned their foreheads together instead.

“Daken, you were right yesterday,” he whispered.

“I've never been right in my life. Why should yesterday be any different?”

Johnny pulled him into a tight hug. “Daken, I care about you... I love you,” he said, voice wavering with emotion. “But- but I'm not helping you grow or get better if we're just enabling each other's bad habits.”

“I don't want to get better,” Daken growled through his teeth.

“I know that's not true. You're just in self-defeat-mode right now,” Johnny shook his head slightly. “The stuff you've been doing the last year, with your sisters and sort of trying to do the family thing and trying to build a 'you'... You're trying to put your life together. You're trying to figure out who you are without all the shadows hanging over you.”

“There isn't a more, there isn't a better, there isn't a 'me',” Daken snapped harshly, hurting inside from throat to chest. Then he softened his voice and pawed Johnny's thigh, pushing his bathrobe up. “Just let me make you feel good. I can do that. I can give you anything you want.”
“Daken, no. Stop,” Johnny grabbed his wrist. Daken heard him swallow hard and smelled tears. “I- I've thought about it a lot, and I talked to Rogue for, like, three hours last night--”

“You talked to Rogue?” Daken asked sharply. His stomach twisted, acid climbed up into his throat. He pulled away, staring at Johnny, numb for a moment, then starting to tremble as numbness gave way to fury. “You talked to Rogue?”

“I--” Panic flickered over Johnny's face. “I know I have really bad judgment when it comes to anything personal. Sometimes- sometimes I really just need a sounding-board and Rogue is-- she's good at--”

“I'm sure she is!” Daken snapped, shoving Johnny away and getting to his feet. “She's driven to 'get better' and be a good, little hero and make the world a better place!” He turned and started tramping toward the door.

“Daken--” he heard Johnny starting to give chase.

“I'm so glad you found someone who can fly with you!” Daken snared.

“Daken, please--”

“GO TO HELL!” Daken shouted as he stepped out the door and slammed it shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

There is going to be an explanation for Daken's sudden emo-ness a bit later, I'm not just rewriting him as super emo, promise.

I am positive there was something else I was supposed to write here, but I am tired and have forgotten...
The high school kids were all in classes when he arrived at the school this time. A handful of the college kids were wandering around or studying outside on their free period. Nobody really paid any attention to Johnny as he strode right up the main walk and into the building. Avengers, Champions, Defenders and X-Men tended to come, go and waffle, but having worn a 4 on your chest was as good as hanging a sign around your neck that said 'trust implicitly'.

And that was half the problem, wasn't it? Johnny would never walk along the hero-villain fence, fascinated by a morally gray world, a morally gray man. Johnny was too pure. Too uncomplicated. (Too stupid.) Too too too to be true. Because he wasn't true. Wasn't real. Johnny was a character. A caricature. His cover-boy smile was his mask. The world loved a Barbie doll. The world loved Johnny Storm.

Even before his family had vanished, Johnny could have counted on his fingers the people who knew him underneath the smile. And there was only one person who had ever really called him on the feeble charade. Only one person who had ever commented on his 'mask'. And how dare anybody defile that rapport?

The teachers' offices had name-placards. Two per door. Johnny found the door with placards for 'Kurt Wagner' and 'Bobby Drake'. The most senior X-Man on staff and his name came second. No wonder he was bitchy. Johnny knocked lightly and waited, biting the inside of his cheek, hoping Nightcrawler wasn't in there. Seconds rolled into minutes and nothing happened. Empty office. Johnny tried the handle and it turned.

“I question your security measures,” he murmured, pushing the door in and stepping through. “Any kid could just walk in here and steal all the quiz answers or something.” He shut the door and glanced around at the tidy office, a couch against the window and desks on either side of the room with nothing but pencil-jars and a couple of small decorations on either. “... Y'know, if all the quiz answers weren't on the laptops you probably have with you right now.”

Johnny sat down on the couch with a sigh and glanced at his watch. Ten to noon. He leaned back and looked at the ceiling, going over it in his head. He was going to be calm. He was going to handle this like a rational grownup because, despite popular belief, that's what he was. He was going to articulate clearly and make himself understood and all of that good stuff. There was no reason to freak out. It was a misunderstanding. Somebody maybe said something without thinking their words through. Somebody maybe interpreted those words it in the worst possible way. Somebody maybe got over-talkative about private things they shouldn't have. Somebody's feelings maybe got hurt and now somebody was wandering around the city probably hurting himself and others....

The school bell rang and Johnny blinked, his eyes feeling dry and tired. He pushed himself forward and leaned his arms against his knees for a few minutes. He heard a hand catch the other side of the door handle and pushed himself to his feet as it turned. He was gliding across the area-rug before the door had fully opened and Bobby caught sight of him, registering a startled look. “John-” He cut off abruptly when Johnny's fist caught his cheek.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU!!” Johnny shouted.
Bobby made a sound that wasn't a word and stumbled, and then cupped his face, staring at Johnny. “J-Jesus Christ, Johnny, I think that's my line here,” he slurred, obviously shaken.

Johnny caught the edge of the door and gave it a quick shove shut, glaring hard at him and clenching his teeth. After a moment, he ground out in a quieter voice, because he really didn't want the entire school to be part of this conversation, “You accused Daken of raping me?”

Bobby's eyes widened. “What? No! What are you-- I didn't--”

“So you didn't say that he used his powers on me?” Johnny demanded.


“What else could that possibly mean?!” Johnny snarled, fingers on both hands curling back into fists.

“I-- I was just-- He started in on this thing, he was saying some bullshit about you two--”

“He wasn't lying, you ass!” Johnny snapped, cutting him off before Bobby could dig himself in any deeper. “We had a 'with benefits' thing for months! And then I died, and... I don't think he's ever really going to forgive me for that.” He bit down on his lip and swallowed against a tight feeling in his throat.

“But-but you...” Bobby mumbled lamely.

“We hang out at parties and disaster areas sometimes, and you think you know everything about me?” Johnny said in a low, pinched voice, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to shove that momentary surge of despair back into the anger pile. “Fuck, Bobby, every tabloid in America has called me a slut at least twice. Why is it even surprising that I've slept with guys before? I went to college. I did jello-shots and experimented sexually and smoked pot this one time.” He bit his lip again for a second, combing a hand through his hair in frustration. “That last thing was weird though.”

“The pot?”

“Yeah, I wasn't into it,” Johnny shook his head. He opened his eyes and took a deep breath. “I don't know if I could say that I've ever actually dated a guy. Aside from Daken, it was just a few one-offs when I was younger... So I guess I'm just not geared to go long-term on that end.” He looked down and his voice came out quieter when he started again, “... I really like Daken... But that's never been healthy-relationship territory... More like a 'self-destructive-behavior buddies' thing.”

“... I'm sorry. I- I was way out of line,” Bobby said quietly.

Johnny looked back up at him with a glare, lower intensity than before. “You think you can make it right by apologizing to me?” he asked.

“No. Obviously I owe Daken an 'I'm so sorry' gift-basket,” Bobby sighed.

“Damn right you do,” Johnny agreed. He clenched his teeth for a moment, so tight his jaw ached, before letting go and muttering guiltily, “He ran off. He was pissed because I- I sort of mentioned that I've been talking to Rogue about, well, about every stupid little thing, including-but-not-limited-to my relationship problems...”

“And you told her about Daken?”
“Yeah, obviously huge breach of trust, so he's probably more pissed at me than he is at you right now,” Johnny said miserably.

“And you don't know where he'd go?”

“No, and he's not going to be found if he doesn't want to be.”

“... He'll come back, Johnny. He's not going to just disappear. Laura and Gabby have him wrapped around their mostly identical little fingers,” Bobby said somewhat reassuringly. “Heck, he may even be over at their place right now.”

“Y-yeah,” Johnny agreed, nodding and hoping he was right. “Yeah... And when he comes back, you're going to apologize.”

“Yes. I am. You're right, and I deserved that dental work you were generous enough to provide free of charge,” Bobby agreed. His eyes flickered down momentarily and then back up to Johnny's. “I'm sorry. I'm really stupid sometimes.”

Johnny nodded and closed his eyes. “Yeah, well,” he reached out, grabbing Bobby and pulling him into a hug. “I'm stupid most of the time.”

“No you're not,” Bobby hugged back.

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“Daken has returned to campus.”

“Wha-huh?” Bobby sat up abruptly, startled, and blinked several times. He rubbed at his face and felt corduroy impressions stamped into his skin. “What?” he asked more clearly, looking around his dorm in confusion.

“Daken has returned to campus,” the disembodied voice of the school's security system replied. Right. Because he'd asked to be notified. Bobby rubbed his hands over his face again. “Time?” he asked.

“Three twenty-two.”

Bobby blew out a sigh that was almost a groan. “... Okay,” he muttered to himself and rolled off of the couch, getting his feet under him and wobbling slightly. “… Okay.” He was stiff all over and his neck ached and he could still feel the corduroy prints on his face as he hobbled toward the door, his joints complained about having fallen asleep face down on the couch.

He paused just a step into the hall, hesitating and biting his lip. Reluctant indecision turned into the decision to wait, and he stood still and silent until Daken appeared around the corner up ahead, walking in a mechanical way. His face was blank for a few seconds before he looked up and noticed Bobby. He broke into a smug grin and started walking with a smoother, slinkier gait toward him. “Did you wait up for me, Snowflake?” he called.

“Didn't think it would be this late,” Bobby said noncommittally, staying still and watching Daken's approach, feeling a little too much like prey. “Look, I... I should not have said that to you. I was being an ass-hole and I'm... I'm sorry,” he stammered.

“Mm? Did you say something to me?” Daken asked in a breezy tone, walking right up and standing a little too close. Bobby started to take a reflexive step back, but there was a door there.
"I'm sorry, dearest, it must have slipped my mind. Was it important?"

Bobby bit the inside of his lip, annoyed at how anxious it was making him to have Daken invading his bubble and not particularly a fan of the feigned absent mindedness either. Did he want Bobby to mea culpa in complete paragraphs or something? Was this a damned essay-test? “... Stop playing drunk. I know that's not even possible for you,” Bobby said quietly.

“Mm, how much do you know about me, Snowflake?” Daken drawled, taking another step, right up into Bobby's face. He hooked a finger through one of Bobby's beltloops. “How much do you think you know about me? How much is accurate, I wonder....”

“Stop it,” Bobby said, voice quieter, faltering. “Where have you even been? It's practically dawn.” Now he sounded like he was scolding some wayward teenaged daughter sneaking in after curfew.

Daken chuckled and dropped his head forward, leaning it on Bobby's shoulder and slipping an arm around his back. “Were you worried, darling?” he murmured fake-sweetly. “... I went to a few bars... 'Til I found somebody who wanted to take me to a hotel.” Daken nuzzled his neck as Bobby's fingers curled slightly and his shoulders tensed. “He was disappointing though... So I left him in that little roach-trap and hit the town again.”

Bobby's stomach was twisting and he bit down on his tongue, trying to force himself not to react. It was a bait. He wanted Bobby to react. It was just a stupid game.

“The neon clubs were heating up by then, and I got a much more promising hit... A brunette, smelled like La Nuit, and a strawberry-blond wearing... mm, it's a Dior, I can't remember the name right now...” He gave a soft sigh. “They took me home to their nice little loft for a spit-roast,” he said and kissed Bobby's neck. Daken let go of his beltloop to wrap both arms around him. “I've had three dicks in me tonight, Snowflake, let's make it four,” he hissed and licked Bobby's ear. “What do you want, my mouth or my ass?”

Bobby lost his battle to not react. He shoved Daken back, shifting to iceform as he twisted a hand in the fabric of Daken's shirt and held him at arm's length, glaring. “Everything's just a stupid game to you, isn't it?” Bobby demanded.

Daken tensed up and his brow pinched for a moment. “Don't--”

“It's all just one big fucking party!” Bobby snarled. “I can't believe I was even bothering to apologize to you. You don't care! It's just a joke, and I'm the punchline.”

Daken held up his hands slightly, looking down at Bobby's transparent arm. “Don't--”

“Oh go to hell!” Bobby snapped and let him go as he turned and pushed the door to his dorm open again, slipping through into the sanctuary within and slamming the door behind him. He squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth, still holding onto his iceform, even alone within the room, not quite ready to let it go yet. “... Go to hell,” he whispered through his teeth.

Chapter End Notes

This is a TBC. I had a series of close events in my head and ended up deciding to do
them all together, so chapters 2-5 build on each other. It is getting angsty up in here, I know. Next chapter finishes up this angst-arch and, well, it's going to be angsty too, but hopefully it will put some anesthetic on it. I'll try and have something more upbeat after that.
Rachel takes the helm.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bobby was eating a Tasty Bite for lunch because he didn't have the energy to make anything and he was too irritable to face the cafeteria today. Even the light patter in the teachers' lounge was getting to him and Bobby was regretting that he hadn't taken lunch to his room or the balcony. No, not the balcony. That's where Daken tended to read in the afternoons.

Kurt was happily telling Kitty plans for a Genesee Village field trip. Jubilee and Dani kept adding snarky suggestions and grinningly decided on making the reenactors feel awkward by having Dani be one of the chaperones. Shogo was being ornery today and kept slapping Jono; so far he'd indignant squawked his way through six two-minute time-outs. It was grating on Bobby's last nerve and there was only so much comfort to be found in sweet and cilantro chickpeas. He glanced up as the door opened and Rachel walked in with a frown on her lips and forehead.

"Has anybody seen Daken today?" she asked.

Bobby's stomach crumpled up inside and lunch was officially a net loss. Everybody else turned, most with blank expressions, Kitty looking concerned as she did too often these days. "What happened?" Kitty asked.

"Nothing's happened. I'm just, " Rachel paused for a second or two and her eyes turned to focus on Bobby, "concerned. He usually has a routine, and I haven't seen him at it today."

"Creating and maintaining a routine is a coping mechanism," Rachel explained, glancing to Kurt for a moment before looking back at Bobby again. "It helps somebody in an uncertain position feel that they're exerting control over their situation. It would be very nice to think that Daken is beyond needing a crutch, but abrupt and unprefaced changes to a routine is cause for concern."

"He's probably just sleeping in," Bobby said, hoping his voice didn't really sound quite as too-loud and too-defensive as it sounded in his head. "He came in after three this morning, bragging how he'd been clubbing all night and slutting it up." There were a few seconds of silence and Bobby pretended to be wholly interested in his lunch.

"... Wasn't Amara supposed to be the one on graveyard duty?" Jubilee muttered.

"So what you're saying is that Daken's been exhibiting acute depressive behavior since at least last night," Rachel said in a flat, unimpressed voice with no hint of a quizzical tone. Bobby suddenly felt like his stomach had fallen out on the floor. "Did anybody see him earlier yesterday?"

"I saw him in the morning. He went for his sunrise run like normal," Dani offered.

"Not unusual for him to get lunch or dinner somewhere else, but I don't think I saw him in any of his reading spots yesterday," Jono added.

Rachel sighed through her nose and bit her lip, running her hands back through her hair. "Okay, so we're probably not looking at more than twenty-four hours, anyway," she said, dropping her hands and shaking her head. She glanced at Dani and asked, "Can you cover my one o'clock?"
“Sure,” Dani nodded.

“Thanks,” Rachel said, turning and walking back out the door.

A few seconds of silence passed.

“... 'Slutting it up',” Jubilee murmured.

“He sounded completely proud of himself!” Bobby protested, dropping his spoon and burying his face in his hands for a moment. “I'm sorry, I don't know psychology! I teach math! People with people-skills don't become mathematicians!”

“Laura had seemed to be under the belief that his depression was linked to serious injury,” Kurt said, frowning thoughtfully.

“I think Laura might be biased by the fact that most of the time when she catches up to Daken, it's after somebody's cut pieces off of him,” Kitty sighed, shaking her head. “... Rachel will fix it... She's the best person to handle him,” she said softly and got up to make herself another cup of coffee.

Rachel arrived at the door and knocked as she did a surface-scan of her radius and felt conscious, but slightly altered, thought patterns inside the room. There wasn't even a blip in the mind within the room when her knuckles hit the wood, as if he didn't hear it at all. With Daken's auditory sense, that wasn't a possibility, which meant it was his mind failing to register the sound, not his ears. Rachel wet her lip and pulled a bit of it between her teeth for a moment, before taking a steadying breath and pressing the reader next to the door. “Lock override: Prestige,” she called.

She heard the click of the bolt releasing and pushed the door open, stepping into the room. The lamps were off, but enough sunlight was peaking in around the curtain to navigate, and it was tidy, free of trip-hazards. “Daken,” she called as she walked through to the sleeping area and approached the bed. He didn't move, but she felt his mind register hearing his name. “Daken, did something happen?” Rachel asked.

Up close, Rachel could see smears of dried blood crisscrossing the bedding. Daken was laying on his side with his back to her, knees pulled up in a loose fetal position. His breaths were slow and even, almost slow enough that someone might assume he was sleeping if they couldn't feel his mind. He wasn't asleep, but 'awake' wasn't quite the right word either. Laura's description of her brother's lows had been curious, not enough to indicate an outright condition on their own, but the cognitive limbo he was in right now was a dead giveaway.

“Daken,” she risked putting a hand on his upward shoulder. He flinched hard. “Daken, what's wrong? Did something happen yesterday?” She could feel that she had his attention, such as it was, although Daken wasn't offering any response. Rachel worried her lip again for a few second, reflecting on the shadow of guilt that had fallen over Bobby, and she tried hazarding a guess. “Did you have an argument with Bobby?”

“... I didn't argue,” Daken whispered. His throat sounded dry.

Rachel let out a short sigh. She could feel this conversation likely to get aggravating for any number of reasons. She debated for a moment and then shrugged off her jacket, dropping it on the floor, and unzipped her boots before pulling back the covers and climbing into the bed. Daken didn't give an outward reaction, but his surface thoughts were tinged with confusion. She scooted
across the mattress and spooned him, wrapping an arm loosely around his waist. “What did Bobby say to you?” she asked, letting her voice go soft; she had Daken's attention now and he wouldn't have difficulty hearing even if she whispered.

She could feel him considering her presence, still confused, before answering in a voice she might not have been able to follow if she didn't supplement her ears by watching the words as they formed in his epi-surface thoughts. “... He said I used my powers on Johnny.”

Rachel frowned slightly, turning that over. Kitty had told her about Johnny's visit the other day, giving a baffled shrug to the idea that he and Daken were apparently friends. Because, though she hadn't said it explicitly, Kitty had trouble imagining anyone being Daken's friend, hung up as she was on the first, second, and third impression Daken had made on her. Rachel assumed by the context of Daken's statement that he hadn't been accused of stabbing or aggressively-healing-at Johnny, which narrowed down the obvious answer to his un-obvious powers. “What did he think you made Johnny do?”

“Fuck me.”

“Did you?” Rachel asked.

“... Johnny doesn't think so,” Daken whispered.

“Did you talk to him? After Bobby?”

“Went to the mansion,” Daken agreed.

“Because you were worried? That Bobby might be right? You weren't sure?” Rachel prodded, pushing him for responses but monitoring his psyche and body-language for agitation. “Because you knew that your subconscious has as much access to your powers as your conscious mind? If not more?”

“... Yes.”

“But Johnny believes that the relationship was consensual?” Rachel asked. “You think he might be wrong?”

“... Yes.”

“Why?” Rachel pressed. “You were dead for a year, did you contact Johnny after that? Did you see him between then and the other day?”

“... No.”

“That's a long time, Daken,” Rachel said gently, searching for his hand and cupping her own around it. “Even if he had formed a psychological addiction to your powers, that's too long for it to still be in effect.” She waited for a while, but Daken remained quiet. “Does it scare you? Does it keep you lying awake at night, wondering? Every time somebody agrees with you, do you stop and ask yourself if they really share your opinion, or if you just convinced them?” she asked.

Daken still gave no physical response, but the listless apathy on the surface of his mind turned to turbulence. She'd found the right heading, though a traitorous one. “Telepathy never stops. Unless it's broken, or blocked... The first thing we teach students in that end of the psi-spectrum is how to define where they start and end, to keep their mental avatar solid and separate from the minds around them... The second thing we teach them is to pretend they don't hear everyone's private thoughts. It's polite, after all, to let them believe that telepathy is something that can be turned on
Rachel went quiet; she could see the muddled cloud of thoughts trying to precipitate into words. “... The output?” he finally asked.

“It's hard to tell sometimes... Like when you have to ask yourself 'did I just say that out loud?'” Rachel explained. “But for me, there's never anyone to answer... I can't tell based on people's reactions, because they wouldn't know, would they?” She paused for a few seconds, Daken's thoughts were still squirming around, but they weren't coalescing, so she kept going. “I know that I've pushed people. I crossed a few lines in some pretty big ways when I was younger... But doing it deliberately... that's easy to put a sticker on and label 'right' or 'wrong'... When I'm not even sure if I've given someone a nudge? Then not only do I not know if I've done something wrong... I also don't know if what they're telling me... what I want to hear... if it's true.”

She felt the apathy's paralysis finally break and Daken make a decision to move. Rachel let him go when he pulled away from her slightly and rolled over. She went pliant as he fished an arm under her and allowed herself to be rolled on her back and repositioned. When he settled, it was on his other side, with his legs slid under the bridge of her knees and his head lain on her chest. For half a moment she'd considered protesting, before she noted the exact placement of his ear. Directly above her heart. She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, curling her arms around him and laying one in his hair; she started stroking in a slow, predictable rhythm.

“Nobody else's pheromone's turn off either... The difference is they never even know they're there. They never even realize they're giving the signals,” Rachel murmured.

“The difference is they're never as strong as mine,” Daken corrected, voice low and broody. “Pheromones are all but vestigial in humans. They're almost nothing... You can say 'no' to a normal person's pheromones...” he trailed off to a whisper at the end.

“I think you have to be putting in a conscious and fairly significant effort to be able to take away someone's 'no,'” Rachel countered softly. “Overriding a person's basic nature isn't something you could do by accident... Regardless of who felt the initial impulse to take things physical, it must have been in Johnny's basic nature to find you attractive.”

“Wishful thinking,” Daken muttered.

“Expert opinion,” Rachel retorted.

A semi-silence stretched between them as she kept slowly stroking his hair. Rachel could feel him struggling to catch hold of something dark and slippery, force it to become words. “... My powers hit lower in the brain than yours. They register as instinct and leave no residue... Even a telepath on your level couldn't tell when I've pushed someone, unless I was clumsy enough to leave dysphoric markers.”

Rachel nodded. “That's true,” she agreed. “You know... it's good that you've taken the time to really understand how your powers work. That could be seen as responsibility, or maybe it's simply having an inquisitive mind. But either way, the how and the why matter to you. That strikes me as a good thing.”

“Then you're naive. A full understanding of an asset is necessary to properly leverage it,” Daken retorted.

She hummed thoughtfully. “You're right. Tactically, that would be valuable,” she murmured, gazing at the ceiling. “Every potential decision has a tactical value and a moral value. Sometimes
they align, sometimes they're at odds.”

“Morality is false. Ethics are plastic. The belief in concrete and unchanging 'right' and 'wrong' values is a delusion not supported by any historical evidence,” Daken said.

“There are some values that don't change.”

“No there aren't.”

“Hurting children. Innocents. Society has always agreed that that's wrong,” Rachel countered.

“False,” Daken didn't even hesitate. “Often throughout human history, on and off but often, there has been a belief that being too 'soft' on children is detrimental to their development into adults, and that they need to be 'toughened up'.”

“... But there were always limits. Making a child chop firewood or taking away their dessert if they've been ornery isn't cruelty,” Rachel protested.

“Sixth century B.C., Sparta,” Daken rebutted immediately. “At age seven boys entered military training. The were given barely enough food to keep them on their feet and brutalized by their teachers in order to weed out the fighters from those too weak to be full citizens of Sparta.”

Rachel was silent for more than a minute, her hand stilling in Daken's hair. “You win,” she said at last. “Ethics is plastic... But morality is internalized, individual. Tell me about your morality. Were the Spartans right?”

“No society has ever cultivated cruelty on a large scale as effectively and efficiently as the Spartans. Not even the Nazis. There's that meme on the internet, actual photos of young, Nazi enlisted boys playing with kittens... If a Spartan boy had been caught playing with a kitten, he would have been beaten,” Daken said tonelessly. “History has glorified the lustrous results of their culture while often glossing the Spartans' methods. The shiny gilt veneer hiding the ugliness within,” his voice grew a tiny bit quieter with each sentence. He curled his hand loosely around Rachel's arm, just below her elbow. “The historiographers of the ancient world were in awe of the Spartans who slayed ten times their number at Thermopylae... Heroes. Your kind self-identify with the Greek word 'hērōs', which is wholly appropriate. 'Hērōs' never indicated someone's capacity for 'good' or 'kindness' or 'generosity'. Only their strength. Their ability to overpower and kill and conquer any obstacle the gods set before them... 'Hero' is an accurate word for people like you and people like me. We're not 'good' or 'bad', we just do whatever we want and the press spins it one way or another.”

“... You didn't answer my question,” Rachel noted. “Do you, personally, believe the were Spartans right?”

Daken was quiet for a few minutes. “... I taught Zach basic hand-to-hand combat. He got bruises... nothing subcutaneous. I gave him books and told him that we wouldn't get dinner before he'd finished the daily reading goals I set,” he said in a slow, careful voice, seeming to analyze the evidence himself even as he presented it to Rachel. “I took him camping without tents or gear on the north end of Madripoor, where it's not developed, just rice farms and forest... I said it was a four day trip, with one day added for every time he whined. It ended up being two weeks... He got bug bites and brier scratches... scrapes and bruises.”

“Doesn't quite compare to the Spartans, does it?” Rachel noted softly. “... Sounds more like Mister Miyagi... Not what I think of when I hear the words 'child abuse',”
Daken didn't make a sound, but Rachel saw a surge of relief and giddy amusement bloom like a lotus in his psyche. She felt her own lips curl up slightly and tilted her head to look down at him. Her eyes lighted on the hand clinging to her arm and she studied his naked, pink thumbnail for a moment before shifting the arm, pulling it from his relaxed fingers and sliding her own hand under his, lifting it to examine his nails. Three were glossy black to match Daken's punk-rock sensibilities, the ring finger and thumb sported bare, polishless nails. “What happened to your manicure?” Rachel asked.

“Picked a few fights yesterday. Lost some nails,” Daken replied.

Rachel's brow pinched slightly. “... Acrylics?” she asked.

“No.”

“Hm.” Rachel curled their hands together and let them fall to the bed. “Who did you pick fights with?” she asked.

Daken gave a slow twitch that was meant to be a shrug. “Skin-heads. Pimps. Ass-holes. Whoever.”

Rachel felt like she was missing a few links in the chain of events. “When was this? Before you spoke to Johnny or after?”

“After.”

“... Why? What did Johnny say?” she asked, frowning. “You said he didn't think you'd done anything wrong. What did he say after that?” Something had upset him, beyond Bobby's thoughtless words, something had sent Daken on a bender yesterday. The bit of languidness Daken's body had found in the last few minutes evaporated, tension reentering his muscles and Rachel felt a little blip of physical pain. He was biting his lip, hard. “... I wanted to suck him off... I know I'm bad for him, but...”

“You adore him,” Rachel sighed, closing her eyes and nodding. Johnny would be easy to adore; Storms always were. He looked so much like the Franklin in Rachel's memories. The hair was different, but the jaw, cheekbones, eyes, it was painful to look at him sometimes. “You're worried he let you because you pushed him?”

“He didn't let me,” Daken corrected, voice dark and pinched. “... He's been talking to Rogue. He's been talking to her about us. He's been-- He's been--” He trembled and his hand tightened around Rachel's. “He had no right to tell her about us. And she had no right to tell him to stay away from me!”

“Did she tell him that?” Rachel asked, returning the fierce grip where their hands were linked.

“She must have,” Daken growled. “Two days ago he told me he loved me and now? Now he has her.”

Rachel was quiet for a little while, stroking his hair and waiting for Daken's trembling and quickened breath to ease a little. “... So you left, and went to pick fights for a while?” she asked in a whisper, once the raw hurt in his psyche had scabbed over again.

“Most of the day,” Daken agreed quietly. “At happy-hour I started trolling through bars... Found somebody who wore the same cologne as Johnny... He was a clumsy oaf in bed, only interested in getting himself off. I washed him off of me in the dirty little hotel shower and went to hit the clubs.”
“... Better luck there?”

“Got taken home by a couple... They were sweet...” Daken said in a small, brittle voice. “... I should have stayed... I couldn't sleep... I kept thinking about him.”

“Johnny?” Rachel asked.

“... No,” Daken whispered.

Rachel frowned, taking a closer look at his surface thoughts and finding the 'him' drifting just beneath the waves, easy to recognize. She sucked in her lip and bit it lightly for a few seconds. It was concerning. There was a part of her that had to wonder if it was simple pragmatism. Daken was obsessive; they'd known that much for years. So then, once Daken had had it illustrated and confirmed to him that Bobby was entirely out of his weight class in a fight, had obsession simply adapted to a playing field Daken knew he could compete on? The interest felt genuine, but was that because Daken had a skill for convincing himself to believe whatever he needed to believe? Daken was too pragmatic, too adaptable and too existentially plastic.

“So you came back here?” she asked, getting back to last night's timeline and away from grim and pointless speculation.

“He was waiting when I came upstairs,” Daken murmured.

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “Bobby was?”

“... He tried to apologize for earlier,” Daken said, voice getting quieter. “I pissed him off again... For a minute I thought he was going to pin me to a wall like the first time.”

“He didn't though. Right?” Rachel felt a little sick that she actually needed to ask. But it had come as a complete shock that Bobby had have done something like that the first time.

“No,” Daken whispered. “He just snapped at me and went back into his room.”

“Okay... And what did you do?”

“ Took a bath and cut myself for a while... 'Til I thought I had it out of my system,” he said.

“I think you undershot a little,” Rachel noted, glancing down at the comforter and the dark red-brown smears it sported.

“... Yes,” Daken agreed softly.

Rachel drew a long, slow breath and blew it out through her mouth before lifting their linked hands up off the bed again and giving them another considering look. “... My gels need a refresh too. I'm a couple weeks out,” she noted and felt despondence ebb slightly as a little surge of interest welled up to the surface. “Do you have a favorite place? I usually go to Dashing Diva.”

“... I like that one,” Daken agreed softly.

“Good. You take a shower, I'm going to take your sheets to the laundry. Hopefully the blood all comes out,” Rachel decided, patting his shoulder and feeling relief, her own, when Daken started to uncurl. She couldn't claim that it had been much better than a lucky guess that he'd respond to spa-therapy, but be it luck or intuition, she'd take it.
Genesee Village is a historic interpretive center made from restored actual 16-1800s buildings in upstate New York (the first two or three were already in that location to begin with, the rest have been donated and moved there from around the state). It's one of the best 'pioneer days' places I've seen; it's much closer to 'outdoor museum' than 'tourist attraction'.

I know there was a lot of dissent on how people interpreted the Madripoor experience shown and referenced in issue 8; I've been in a few discussions about it on DeviantArt and in chats, and since I've referenced it this chapter I'm going to clarify my interpretation.

First off, I did not like the kick in the butt in that scene, and I'm not sure how fully scripted the writing for Marvel comics is these days before it goes to the artists (it didn't used to be dialogue-scripted at all, right up into the 90s, I imagine it's more scripted than that these days, but I don't know exactly how thoroughly) so I don't know if it was the writer or the artist who's to blame for the kick, but I wasn't a huge fan of the art for this issue in general, so I mostly ignore it and focus on the dialogue.

"Snaaaaap. You're always finding weird ways to teach me lessons! Like when you had me sleep outside for a week--"

Dialogue cues:
- Zach is plainly excited as he's speaking.
- Zach is not self-censoring.
- Zach uses the word 'had' and not 'made'.

Dialogue suggests that this child is not afraid of the person he's speaking to lashing out or punishing him for his words. The use of 'had' rather than 'made' and the fact that he interprets the experience as a relevant 'lesson' suggests that he does not view it as unfair in retrospect. He is sold on the 'wax on, wax off'.

Contextual cue:
'Roughing it' camping trips are a classic (at this point almost cliched, but it still works well) character-building program for 'at risk' teenagers. When teenagers are arrested on misdemeanors in some jurisdictions, if it's a first or second offense, they'll be sent to a camp specifically for 'at risk' teens where the experience will be physically demanding but also geared toward fostering specific social and problem-solving skills. This is a very well-documented method for dealing with/teaching teenagers who are having serious social problems and it is generally considered to be positive and constructive by therapists and other youth guidance specialists. The fact that Grace very specifically referenced and outdoor experience as opposed to really anything else he could have stuck in there makes me believe that this kind of thing was in the back of his mind and he did not intend for it to be interpreted as abusive. I don't think Grace was stupid or out of touch with his characters, I think he had some very specific points he was subtly referencing that might be lampshading further out. The casual-violence issue does bother me, and I'm not okay with it (and Rictor... I don't think he looked up the back-story/age-difference there...) but in little details, I think I see where he's maybe going with some things and I can appreciate the direction.

I don't live in New York. Picking out a nail salon to reference, I asked Google Maps for "manicure & pedicure salon near Central Park, New York, NY" and picked the one
with the best name. Judging by the pictures on Google, it also has the best interior decor, which counts towards style-points, so Daken would appreciate it.
Daken imparts wisdom to the next generation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daken lay in the spotted shade of a myrtle tree, listening to the sounds of the park and the murmur of lessons being conducted inside. Time drifted nebulous and indistinct until he heard the automated bell, quickly followed by a bustling from every classroom. A few minutes later, children started spilling out into the front acre. Daken ignored the noise, not bothering to so much as open his eyes, and the overwhelming majority of students gave him a wide berth. Finally he heard a familiar gait approaching from downwind and then knees thumped down in the grass next to him.

“How were classes?” Daken asked.

“Sojobo’s an ass,” Zach spat.

Daken chuckled, opening his eyes and glancing up at him through polarized lenses. “Any particular reason?”

“Every other thing out of his mouth is like ‘This is the most basic conversion. You haven’t memorized the periodic table? I learned this when I was ten.’ I can’t stand that stupid little know-it-all punk!” he elaborated.

“Are you expected to memorize the periodic table? I think there’s a song or something,” Daken frowned slightly.

“No! Miss Saint Croix said ‘memorizing the things you’re going to use the most will save time, but in this day and age knowing where to find the information is more important.’ She said that!” Zach protested.

“Well then, tell Tengu that when he has his own classroom he can run it the way he wants, and until then he should respect and honor his teacher,” Daken replied, sitting up and rolling his shoulders.

“That’s… super not-snarky,” Zach complained, frowning.

“Do you want a zinger that will make the other children giggle, or do you want to properly shame him?” Daken raised an eyebrow.

“It can’t be both?”

“You’ve said before that he doesn’t understand your jokes or pop-culture references,” Daken pointed out. “If he doesn’t appreciate American humor then he’s not going to be injured much by American insults.”

Zach made a dissatisfied non-word sound.

“Cleverness is good, but it’s not the most important thing. Knowing your audience and what you want to accomplish is,” Daken explained, drawing his knees up and resting his arms on them. “The East Asian powers still use academic-shaming as an important tool in education, which is what he’s trying to do to you. So flip it around and point out that it’s him who’s failing to meet classroom expectations,” he said, and then tilted his head and reconsidered. “Although if Saint Croix is
teaching, bullying is probably a graded activity.”

“Yeah, she’s a mega-bitch,” Zach agreed with a grin.

“Remember how profanity works, Zach?” Daken sighed. Zach’s working vocabulary suffered in the presence of formal education, or rather the other partakers of it. Depressing irony.

“A swear has less ‘impact’ the more often I use it,” Zach muttered, looking at his shoes and fidgeting with the laces.

Daken reached out and slung an arm around him. “You’re trying to blend in with the herd,” he said. “I’m sure you’re not doing it deliberately. It’s instinct, and that’s hard to fight. But remember that it’s a sheep instinct.”

“I’m not a sheep,” Zach said firmly.

“Never forget that,” Daken said, fluffing his hair. “What's your homework load like for the weekend?”

“It’s not too bad,” Zach shrugged. “Mister Wagner told everybody to pick out something off the banned-book list but we don’t have to start reading it ‘til next week.”

“Did you want to see the Pixar movie?” Daken asked.

Zach frowned and faltered, confused and nervous. “No, that’s baby stuff,” he lied.

Daken suppressed a smirk. “Hm, well I suppose you’d know better than the Film Academy,” he noted, further amused by Zach trying to figure out if he was supposed to laugh or be embarrassed by the sardonic comment. “Gabby wanted me to take her this weekend.”

“Oh,” Zach said and wavered for a few seconds. “Well, I mean, if you’re going anyway, I might as well hang out.”

“Might as well,” Daken agreed, chuckling softly.

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Gabby texted ‘We’re here!” and a suitable number of cute emojis as she and Laura approached the school grounds. She slipped the phone back into the little pink purse Daken had given her on their last visit and hopped happily along at Laura’s side while Jonathan strained against his leash and tried to smell all the smells. A lot of students were out on the lawn and Lin Li came over to meet them as they approached the stairs.

“Hello, Jonathan. Hello Gabby and Laura,” she greeted, kneeling down to give Jonathan a scratch.

“Nice one give food?” Jonathan asked.

“Jonathan, you already had your breakfast,” Gabby scolded. “Hi Lin! Do you want to babysit him? Daken’s taking me to a movie and I don’t think we can pass Jonathan off as a service-animal.”

“I’d be happy to,” Lin Li agreed with a smile.

“Thank you,” Laura said, nodding to her.

“Thanks, Lin!” Gabby handed her the leash with a bright grin and cast her a wave as they went up the steps. Inside, she spotted Daken coming down the stairs before she caught his scent, and
swallowed a tiny surge of annoyance as she saw Zach trailing after him and obviously dressed to go out. She didn't particularly relish sharing fun-brother-sister-day with the sulky boy, but Gabby put on a bright smile and skipped up to throw her arms around Daken as he reached the floor. “I planned the day! We’re gonna get a pizza and then go to the movie and then walk the long way back through the park and ride on the carousel!” she announced.

“Sounds like you planned a thorough itinerary,” Daken agreed, patting her back and pulling at the strap of her purse. “... Gabby, did you put *pins* in your Dolce and Gabbana handbag?”

“This one's a banana, 'cause it rhymes!” Gabby proudly held up the bag and pointed to a round pin with a googly-eyed banana and the caption 'It's *appeeling*!'

Daken started chuckling as Zach scoffed loudly. “It was a *designer* bag. You *completely* ruined the value,” he accused.

“She personalized it. That has it's own kind of value,” Daken sighed, shaking his head and smoothing his hand over Gabby's hair before she could form her own retort.

“I'm going to be most of the afternoon,” Laura said, stepping up behind her as Gabby and Zach cast each other cool looks. “Do you want to do dinner?”

“Sounds perfect,” Daken agreed.

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Zach refused to go on the carousel because it was stupid, but Daken was humoring his sister and had gone with her. Because he'd do anything for *Gabby*, even if it was stupid. Zach folded his arms and glared at the pavilion, waiting for them to come back. Why was he bothering to wait? He should just walk back to the school on his own. He bit his lip, wavering indecisively for a few minutes, ultimately unable to make the decision and staying put.

Cute, perfect, little *Gabby* got to do whatever she wanted. She even got to make a fool out of Daken by making him go on a stupid baby-ride. It wasn't fair. Zach wondered whether Daken would shrug and laugh it off if *he* destroyed an eight hundred dollar designer handbag. Not a chance. Gabby could act like a goofy little baby and everybody *loved* her for it. Daken loved her for it. She already had her cool big sister, she didn't *need* Daken.

People started spilling out of the pavilion after the carousel stopped and Zach took a deep breath and swallowed, blinking quickly. He was fine. He was cool. He stayed leaned against the railing as Daken and Gabby walked out. Gabby started to walk right past him, but Daken paused. “Shall we continue?” he asked, looking at Zach in a way that made him fight the urge to squirm, feeling scrutinized.

“Sure,” Zach replied, pushing away from the rail and walking quickly.

After a few strides, he felt a hand on his shoulder, not stopping him, just resting there. “Do you want to come to dinner with Laura and us?” Daken asked.

“... Nah, I got a raid,” Zach shook his head and kept facing forward.

There was a short pause and then Daken asked, “Are you angry at me?”

“I-- No!” Zach looked up at him, startled, and almost tripped.

“Alright,” Daken nodded, patting Zach's shoulder and then dropping the arm back to his side. “I
was concerned that might be why you lied to me."

Zach's face burned with shame and embarrassment. “I...” he mumbled, fidgeting and trying to get himself moving again. “I just-- I don't want to go and telling the truth is rude.”

“That's true,” Daken said with a soft chuckle. “But you're allowed to be a little rude to me sometimes.”

“Okay,” Zach nodded, biting his lip.

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After seeing the girls off, Daken climbed the stairs and made his way toward the student dorms. He stopped in front of Zach's door and knocked, then waited. Daken frowned slightly as the wait lengthened and knocked again. The school's walls and doors had exceptional sound-proofing due to the frequent occurrence of children and teachers with expanded sensory ranges, and he couldn't quite tell if the room beyond was empty. Finally he heard the electric lock click back, indicating that Daken had been granted entry, and he pushed the door in.

Zach was sitting on the floor with a pair of scissors and his Blueberries jacket, which he seemed to have mangled the sleeves of. Daken suppressed a reaction, because every sense told him Zach was very nearly in tears. He shut the door and tilted his head, giving the jacket a blank look. “Doing some tailoring?” he asked.

“... Personalizing it,” Zach explained in a hoarse whisper.

“... Huh.” Daken knelt down and picked at one of the semi-destroyed sleeves. “Playing on elements of punk and grunge, I suppose? Is there some new musical movement this reflects?”

“... Are you mad?” Zach's voice cracked. He didn't meet Daken's eyes, and he stank of fear.

“It's your jacket, Zach,” Daken sighed, shaking his head, then he reached out and gently caught Zach's chin, lifting his face. “Why are you angry at me, Zach?”

Zach's eyes widened. “N-No! That's not-- I'm not!” he flustered.

“You don't like it when I spend time with my sisters?” Daken guessed.

“That's-- No! No! I'm- I'm--” Zach stuttered frantically for a few seconds and then his face crumpled and he sobbed. “I'm a stupid stupid jerk! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!”

Daken pulled the jacket out of Zach's lap and moved it aside, then scooted forward on his knees as Zach curled his arms in and squeezed his eyes shut, shaking hard and crying in earnest now. He flinched and looked up sharply when Daken caught his shoulder and then went still, sniffling and making tiny, confused sounds as Daken wrapped his arms around Zach and held him. They were quiet for a few moments as Daken tried to piece together something eloquent and meaningful but drew a blank. Finally he swallowed, rested a hand on the back of Zach's head and murmured, “You're not stupid. You're not a jerk. You're not bad.”

Zach let out a little hiccup and adjusted his arms, moving them so he could cling back. A moment later he was sobbing again. “I'm sorry. I don't-- I don't--” he mumbled, shaking his head and leaning into Daken. “I don't know... I don't want-- I'm just--” he hiccuped and buried his face in Daken's shoulder.

“My sisters are going to be part of my life, Zach,” Daken said, keeping his own breathing even and
measured. “That's not going to stop.”

“I know. I know...” Zach sniffled. “It's just-- They're cooler than me.”

“They're cooler than you?” Daken repeated, a smirk tugging at his lips suddenly.

“... They're super cool ninjas like you...” Zach whined.

“Laura's a 'ninja' like me, but I'm not sure Gabby could do stealth if her life depended on it,” Daken corrected.

“She's got your cool ninja-powers. She's like you, and I'm...” Zach trailed off, squirming a little.

“Zach,” Daken leaned back a little and pushed Zach away to look at him. “You think they're cooler than you because of their powers?” he asked. Zach made a noncommittal sound and shrugged his shoulders, not lifting his head. “Zach, listen: you shut down an omega. Now, I haven't read all of the official rule-book, but I think that probably means that you're an omega.” He watched Zach frown softly and then finally look up with an uncertain expression. “As powers go, you have my sisters and I all outclassed.”

“... Oh.” Zach chewed on his lip, looking like he didn't really believe it.

“Are you afraid I don't need you anymore?” Daken asked, studying his reaction carefully.

Zach's face crumbled again and he squeezed his eyes shut. “You don't,” he whispered.

“... Agree to disagree then.”

Zach hiccuped and made a strained sound in the back of his throat. Daken pulled him into another embrace, Zach returned it immediately and started sniffling again. Daken stroked his hair, stiff with mousse, and let a few minutes of quiet hang, before asking, “Do you want to pick a movie to see next weekend? Just you and me?”

“Uhuh,” Zach whimpered and nodded.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry, Chansey, I promised you a not-angsty chapter and then I put a teenager in it and, well, an angst-free teenager is like an unsalted potato chip.

I didn't have any songs to express Zach's teen-angst and paranoia in my play-lists, so I went to Pandora and started a teen-angst station, and stumbled into Simple Plan. Reflecting on it, I know I'd heard the name before, but I don't think I ever deliberately or knowingly listened to them; I'm sure I must have heard them playing on the radio in the background during the 00s, but in a way that I didn't really focus in on or ask "who is this?". They're like if somebody said "We need a song about teen-angst as a general concept but not in relation to any specific topic." I am still trying to decide if Simple Plan was supposed to be a parody-band, and then people took them seriously and they were kind of dumbfounded and didn't know what to do so they just kept rolling with it.
While working on this chapter, I decided that I needed to nail down an exact location for the school. I poked around Google Maps and picked out a big enough open area that didn't have any structures or paths on it and didn't have a name assigned to it. Street-view shows that a big chunk of bedrock is poking up through the soil there, and that's why they just made the paths go around it and didn't build anything and not much is growing on top of it etc., so I figure Illyana just could have teleported the top off of it to make it level and dropped the school there. Easy-peasy. It's just west of the Great Lawn, here's the street-view.

Here's the location:
That huge building on the east side is the Met. The various illustrations that have been done of the various X schools over the decades don't make it seem like it should be anywhere near that big, and the plot I assigned the school is almost to the size of a city block.
Daken's up to something.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Daken had taken to running the park's trails in the two o'clock hour. After the lunch-hour running clubs had cleared out, before the school track clubs started showing up. It was when the paths had the least human-obstacles to disrupt the rhythm of his stride and the palliating calm of meditative calisthenics. He was passing the Sheep Meadow when a woman in dark gray and aqua three-quarter leggings and matching sports-bra came up on his right. Her dark brunette ringlets bounced charmingly with each step and she cocked her head to the side, casting Daken a smirk.

“Progress?” Daken asked, easing into a jog.

“I've found everything I need,” she replied, pacing him.

“Let's talk commission,” Daken said.

She shook her head. “Pro bono.”

He frowned. Like most professionals, he liked things commodified, it was the only way to keep a professional transaction and relationship professional. “Have I earned a favor?” he asked.

“Not as such, I suppose, but I do still feel guilty,” she shrugged.

“You warned me.”

“I did, and you didn't listen. I couldn't really have expected you to listen, and you didn't. I feel guilty anyway,” she sighed and shook her head. “But anyway, after reading some of the reports I stole, I'm glad to do this out of pure outrage.”

Daken nodded slowly. “... Those reports?” he asked.

She reached out and slipped a flashdrive into his pocket, so quickly that if anyone had been watching them, had they so much as blinked, they would have missed it. “Roll whatever you were planning to pay me into the operating cost,” she said. “We're going to need somebody good for the patsy on this, their security is no joke.”

“Pick somebody you respect but not somebody you like,” Daken said.

“Mmmhmhm... That's making it fun,” she chuckled.

“Two hundred fifty bitcoins?” Daken asked, glancing at her.

She tilted her head and considered. “For a starting offer. Are you prepared to go up to four hundred?” she asked.

“Only if they deliver.”

“Naturally,” she agreed. “Give me a week to make the deal and get a timeline established. I'll contact you again next week with an expected delivery date.”

Daken nodded. “Sooner is better than later, but not at the risk of sloppiness.”
“I know,” she nodded and then put a delicate hand around his bicep and slowed, drawing them both to a stop along the side of the footpath. She put her other hand on his shoulder and looked up at him with a slightly pinched brow. “Be careful.”

“Shouldn't I be telling you that?” Daken asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I'm not living in the lion's den,” she pointed out.

Daken sighed and shook his head. “Pryde and Monroe adore Laura and want to trust her judgment. And they've as much pride invested in my rehabilitation as whatever line they might tell themselves about 'family',” he said, pulling at one of her ringlets and watching it spring back. “Most of them either want to help me or just stand back and keep out of it. Drake is the only problem.”

She clicked her tongue and then smirked and shook her head. “Why am I not surprised?” she chuckled. “He takes kid gloves. Do you want some advice?”

“Advice? I'm not sure how much stock I'd put in it,” Daken gave an amused scoff. “I think your overall success rate tends to be inversely proportional to exposure time.”

“Fine. 'Usable intelligence' then,” she corrected herself. “His weakness.”

“He has a lot of weaknesses,” Daken noted, a sneer tugging at his lip. “All psychological.”

“Pity is the easiest to leverage,” she said, moving the hand from his shoulder to catch his chin as she looked him in the eye. “Give him some soft-side and a bit of broken-wing.”

Daken frowned slightly. “He's happy to break the wing himself. He cut me most of the way in half the first time we met.”

Her eyebrows rose slightly. “Hm. He can get a bit nasty sometimes,” she admitted and sighed. “Well, when he gets into the self-pitying, telling him you relate to his angst and stroking his ego is a good option.”

“Oh, so that's your sagely advice? Do the thing that works on nearly every insecure moron ever?” Daken rolled his eyes.

“Tried and tested, dear,” she chuckled, pushing herself up on her toes to kiss his cheek. “Take care of yourself.”

“You do the same,” he replied as she sank down and stepped away from him. Daken watched her take off down the path again and head in the direction of the fountain, before he resumed his own run and broke to the left, making his way up the west side of the lake.

Chapter End Notes

What my foreshadowing lacks in subtlety, it makes up for in vagueness. Little and probably irritating, but I wanted to sew some seeds now.
Daken accidentally teaches a class.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had started on a Tuesday, when Laurie, on her way to take an early shower, had looked out a window and spotted Daken engaged in one of his daily rituals. Since being given vaguely defined asylum he’d been spending an hour of the early morning, when it was light but still crisp, on the front acre, rotating through a personalized amalgam of qigong, tai chi and hatha yoga. The thing Laurie found most interesting was that he did so without a shirt.

The following day, Laurie, Cessily, Megan and (for some reason) Ruth found themselves gathered around the same window, giggling and exchanging bawdy commentary. By that afternoon, Cessily had made a daring proposal and plans were being discussed. When the sun rose again, all four girls, dressed in workout wear, made their way across the lawn and asked a somewhat wary Daken if they could be allowed to follow along. Initially he’d given a shrug and told them to do whatever they wanted, but before his usual hour had reached its end, he'd found himself correcting their postures and stance.

By Monday, four girls had turned into a mixed-bag of nearly two dozen of the school's young residents, and Daken was explaining pranayama breathing and the relevance of kundalini.

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“It's open,” Kitty called after the knock at her office door, not bothering to turn as she kept her attention on the collection of students out on the lawn.

The door opened and Bobby announced, “It is, like, five AM, Kitty, there had damn well better be donuts.” Kitty wordlessly held up a Krispy Kreme box and listened him walking across the room. “So why am I awake at five AM?” he asked.

“Daken has a class,” Rachel said, her voice so amused it almost made Kitty want to snap at her. “Wait, what?” Bobby demanded, coming up behind Kitty and looking past her to watch the neat, regular lines of teenagers following through some kind of routine which had somewhat familiar gestures mixed into it, but wasn't any distinct dojo that Kitty recognized. “You gave him a class?”

“No!” Kitty exclaimed, turning briefly to glare at him, because how the hell could he believe she'd be that crazy. “Nobody told him he could run a class!”

“From what I've picked up, it seems like it just sort of aggregated organically,” Rachel noted, leaning against the window frame, a smirk on her lips. “I assume it's because Daken's bare chest has the gravity of a black-hole.”

“That is a completely reasonable theory,” Bobby agreed, nodding slowly as he stared through the window.

“Bobby, no,” Kitty said firmly, narrowing her eyes at him. Bobby didn't even tear his eyes away to look at her while responding, “What?”

“Eat your donuts,” Kitty ordered.
Bobby finally glanced down to locate the box again and pulled out a donut before returning to the view outside. “So... what exactly is happening here and how?” he asked.

“As I've gleaned it, Daken has a morning exercise routine, and about a week ago students started showing up to join him,” Rachel explained. “I assume many of them are primarily there to watch him flex, but after seeing it, I was kind of surprised by the demographic diversity down there.”

“Rockslide?” Bobby sounded baffled.

“Rockslide probably thinks it's ninja-training. I'm sure nobody told him that, it's just what he thinks,” Kitty sighed.

“If they're not all there for the eye-candy, there must be more to like,” Rachel pointed out, glancing back at them.

“What are we going to do about it? Tell him he has to stop being an exhibitionist and do his yoga in the Danger Room?” Kitty asked.

“Are we saying it's a bad thing for the kids to learn yoga?” Rachel raised an eyebrow.

“Rachel,” Kitty cast her a frown.

“So... I might just have a skewed perspective from being a math teacher, but... is that one of the most attentive, well-behaved classes you've ever seen?” Bobby asked, glancing at Kitty and then Rachel, the latter of whom nodded, smirking.

“... God damn it,” Kitty swore, rubbing her hands over her face. “... How many credits?”

Chapter End Notes

It's been a long time since I've tried to write drabbles, but I'd like to do something that's primarily low-key fluff without having to stress about destination or order (ironically, *Agent of Doomgard* was originally supposed to be a drabble-series, but it got completely out of hand). I've also been wanting to write some romance. Not all of them will be romance (like the above), and they won't all be fluff (I can't do anything without some angst), but on average I think most of them will be both. I decided to rate it 'mature' because there may be smut in some chapters.

Also, before anybody points out "Uh, Laurie's dead," I'm gonna head that off at the pass. Laurie Tromette: Transonic.
Bobby switched off his alarm and yawned, rubbing his eyes. He took a deep breath and sighed it out slowly before sitting up and scrubbing a hand through his hair. Two weeks before they started summer-schedule; no home-room, late-start and half the class-load. He pushed himself out of bed and stumbled across the room to peek around the curtain and see what kind of day it would be, sun or too-humid-overcast. He'd meant to look at the sky, but his eyes were immediately drawn by motion to the lawn.

Thirty-ish kids all stood in rows looking as if *Walk Like an Egyptian* should be playing over them, and one very topless yog-chi instructor walked between the rows, talking and correcting postures. Bobby's gaze drifted along the lines of his tattoo, taking in how they interacted with his muscles. Daken reached the edge of one row and rotated around to walk up the one in front of it, giving Bobby a view of his back, his perfect shoulders, the slope of his ribs back into more muscle. Without the distraction of his chest, it was easier to appreciate Daken's narrow waist, how elegantly the line of his body curved. And though not bared quite so flagrantly as the top half of him, the note had to be made: *dat ass*. He had the physique of a Calvin Klein model.

Not to mention the piss-off *attitude* of a Calvin Klein model. Bobby tore himself away from the window and glared at the curtain as it fell back into place. Stop *ogling* the antisocial, mentally-unstable, arrogant, insufferable paragon of perfect proportions. He scrubbed his hands through his hair in agitation and turned with a huff, heading for the shower. Cold-shower or stress-relieving-shower, he'd decide when he got there.

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Kitty snuck in and out of the kitchen through the wall so she could snag a chicken burrito without waiting through the line in the cafeteria. She was in charge, she could do that. She worked hard for the right to cut. Once she'd secured the burrito, a fruit-cup, baby-carrots and cranberry juice, she made her way towards the staff patio. In the home-stretch, she saw Bobby stepping out of the teachers' lounge with a bowl in hand. “Hey. Headed for the patio?” she asked.

“Weather like this? Yeah,” Bobby agreed with smile. “Got to enjoy the sun before it gets too hot and we all start hating it.”

“I refuse to get heat-jaded. It's not going to happen. This year will be different,” Kitty said firmly.

“Take *that*, global-warming. Ain't gonna get us down,” Bobby chuckled, falling into step with her.

“What's that one?” Kitty asked, glancing into his bowl.

“Vegetable Korma,” Bobby replied, pushing through the door as Kitty walked through the wall next to it.

“I'm calling it right now. You are addicted to Tasty Bites. Admitting it is the first step,” Kitty said, blinking in the sudden sunlight.

“Is this an intervention?” Bobby asked with an amused snort. “I like Indian food, sue me.”

“I wonder whether your delicate American palate would even be able to handle the real thing,”
drewled a sardonic voice and Kitty turned, while Bobby was letting out an irritated groan, to see Daken laying with his back right on the faux-brick floor of the patio, holding a book up above him and apparently reading it through his sunglasses.

“They’re real recipes,” Bobby retorted and looked back at the door, obviously considering returning to the sanctuary of indoor confinement.

“Everything’s a ‘real’ recipe. I never called your lunch’s physical existence into question,” Daken replied, grinning slightly. “As to how ‘ethnic’ your ‘ethnic cuisine’ is, do you imagine the peasants in Maharashtra or Bengal eat ‘restaurant classics’? And of course to coddle American audiences, they need to leave out the pura jwala and add a tablespoon of sugar.”

“Considering they’re mostly tomato and onion puree, I doubt they’d need any sugar,” Kitty said before Bobby could jump back into the argument, catching his arm and pulling him toward one of the tables. “And I don’t know the other word you said. Based on context... red-pepper?”

“When ripe, though many dishes use it green,” Daken said, turning a page in his book, either capable of reading and holding a conversation at the same time or trying to give the appearance of it. “And I do notice that all the ‘Bites’ without paneer in them have the ‘vegan’ label. That’s not very ‘ethnic’. I imagine most of those ‘real recipes’ would generally include ghee, if they were trying to be ‘traditional’.”

“I am genuinely surprised to hear that you’ve ever set foot inside a grocery store,” Bobby snapped, dropping into a chair and rolling his eyes.

“That’s a leap of logic. I’ve seen your little idiot-pouches in the cabinet.”

“Idiot-pouches?” Bobby demanded and Kitty groaned, hiding her face in her hands.

“Microwave-and-eat? Isn’t it a common Americanism to express ease-of-use with the prefix ‘idiot’ or ‘dummy’?” Daken asked innocently.

“Oh go to hell,” Bobby spat, turning his attention to his food and shoving a spoonful in his mouth.

“Calm down,” Kitty sighed, shaking her head and opening her cranberry juice.

“Mm, I must be having difficulty understanding the subtleties of American culture.”

“Fuck you,” Bobby failed his attempt to pretend he was ignoring the heckling.

“Bobby.” Kitty cast him a stern look. Somebody had to be the adult here.

“If you plan to buy me dinner first, it had better not come in an idiot-pouch,” Daken said with a lilt just shy of singing it.

Kitty saw Bobby's jaw flex as he clenched his teeth hard. “Ignore it,” she hissed.

“Yeah, you’re real smart, aren’t you, Daken?” Bobby growled, glaring at him. “So smart you spent half a century being fed a line.”


Daken closed his book and put it down, then folded his arms over his stomach. “Better than spending a lifetime believing my own lie, isn’t it?” he asked quietly.

“Hey!” Kitty snapped, glaring at Bobby hard enough to keep him in his seat. “Knock it off! Both of
“Last time I checked, you were both supposed to be adults!”

“You don't know anything about it!” Bobby was close to yelling now.

“Bobby, shut up!”

“No, of course not,” Daken sat up abruptly. “Why would I know anything? I'm the moron who spent half a century under the thumb of a literal and figurative monster.” He rolled to his feet in one fluid motion. “I'm obviously too stupid to understand anything about being queer,” he sneered, walking toward the door.

“You can go right to hell!”

Daken spun around just before he reached the door and shot back, “Why bother? We know it can't hold me!” He turned again and swept through the door, slamming it behind him.

“God damn it, Bobby, are you five years old?” Kitty snarled.

“He started--” Bobby stopped himself, realizing the retort wasn't helping his case in the maturity department.

“If I'm remembering right, he started an argument about Indian food,” Kitty pointed out reproachfully. “And besides that, I expect more from you, Bobby!”

“Well clearly I'm the ass-hole here;” Bobby grumbled, trying to eat again.

“Ya kinda are!” Kitty agreed and sighed. “Bobby, ignore him. He's just pushing your buttons.”

“And I'm the one who has to be the bigger man.”

“You're an X-man, Bobby, I damn well hope you can be the bigger man,” Kitty retorted.

Zach came out of his last class and turned to notice Daken leaning against the wall a few yards down the hall. He'd never waited outside a class like that before and Zach felt a twinge of worry as he walked over, not hurrying because he was cool. “Hey--” he started, before Daken caught his shoulder and leaned down, whispering in Zach's ear.

“We're leaving. Take no more than will fit in that backpack without making it puffy. A pair of long-pants for the plane and a change of underwear and shirt should be enough clothes, we can shop when we get there,” he said quickly. “Leave your phone. Meet me at Toll in twenty minutes.”

Zach nodded. His mind was racing with questions, but he didn't voice them. He started walking quickly back to his dorm, without another glance at Daken. When he got there, he dumped his books and computer out on the bed. He peeled his phone out of its case and shut it down to pull out the memory-card; Daken had taught him to save everything he wanted to keep there instead of internal storage, because every phone is a burner. Then he started trying to figure out what the bare essentials were.

A few minutes later, Zach hurried out of his room and walked quick-but-casual through the halls and out of the building. None of the teachers stopped or even noticed him, because why would they? They only noticed if he was being bad or messing with the kids they actually liked. He stepped off campus, crossed the road and made his way up the trail on the other side until he was out of sight of the school, before breaking into a run. As he reached the playground, he spotted
Daken sitting on the bench across from the gate and skidded to a stop. “R-ready!” he chirped.

“Thank you for being prompt,” Daken said, getting up and clapping Zach's shoulder briefly before starting toward eighty-fifth at a brisk walk. He was wearing a ball-cap and sunglasses. It was sunny, so he didn't look at all out of place, but Zach knew the only time Daken wore a ball-cap was to baffle facial-recognition bots. All he was carrying was a long, thin, semi-rigid bag that could have passed for an instrument case, but happened to be just the right size for his swords.

“Where are we going?” Zach asked, trotting along beside him.

“The subway,” Daken replied simply.

Zach nodded and pursed his lips. Assume there are spies everywhere, and never announce your destination in public. If they were taking the subway, then they weren't going far before shifting to a different method of transportation. They were probably headed for an airport or Amtrak station, and Zach would know where they were going then. It was only curiosity that made him ask anyway. It didn't matter where they were going; all that mattered was Daken hadn't left without him.

At the station, Daken stopped at the card machine and held a hand out to the side, flick-waving it brusquely. Silently directing Zach to stay out of the field of view of the hidden-camera that the machine almost definitely had. He pulled cash out of his wallet.

“... I already have a Metro-card,” Zach pointed out, leaning against the wall next to the machine and watching Daken.

“Throw it out,” Daken replied quietly. “I'm sure they all have digital serial-numbers that can be tracked.”

“Right. Yeah. That makes sense,” Zach agreed, nodding quickly and pulling the card out of his pocket. He looked around for a garbage can.

“Wait,” Daken said softly, and wet his lip, looking thoughtful. “Give it to somebody else.”

“So if they try to track it, they'll be tracking them!” Zach said with an excited grin.

Daken smirked and nodded, taking one card out of the machine and going back to the main menu to buy another.

“I'll be right back,” Zach promised and darted away, wandering through the crowd of commuters until he spotted a homeless guy standing near the stairs, asking people for change. “Hey man, I think this has, like, ten bucks on it, and I don't need it anymore. Here,” he said, holding the card out.

“Oh, hey, thanks man,” the homeless guy said, smiling at him.

“No problem, dude. Keep cool,” Zach said, giving him a wave and heading back for where he'd left Daken.

“You too, man!”

He found Daken a couple yards from the card machine and fell into step with him as he started toward the platform. “I gave it to a homeless guy,” Zach said proudly. Always be nice to crows and homeless people: they see everything, remember your face, and everybody underestimates them.
“Perfect,” Daken said, handing him a new card as they reached the turnstiles.

After walking into a car, Zach looked up at the screen that listed the stations this train was headed for and frowned. He glanced up at Daken, but his eyes were focused straight ahead, and he was inscrutable. Zach chewed on his lip and followed suit. A transfer and an hour on pins and needles later, they were finally arriving at the airport. Zach chased quickly along as Daken strode with purpose past the various check-ins before finally turning to head for the Madripoor Air desk.

Zach grinned so wide it was almost painful as he stood back and watched Daken talk to the lady behind the desk and check his swords. It was going to be just him and Daken again. No stupid teachers or stupid X-Men or stupid siblings. It was going to be like before but better.

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Madripoor Air’s first class featured elegant little staterooms affordable to those who made a dishonest living. Daken sat at their small table, eating grilled trout, sipping Rene Rostaing and reading Jared Diamond. Zach happily had teriyaki and Dr. Pepper, before he climbed into one of the chair-beds, watched a movie with subtitles, and then dozing off. Daken glanced away from his book to watch Zach several times and wonder if he shouldn't have brought him. Of course he should have. He never should have left him behind at all, and he'd made a promise not to do it again. So obviously he'd had no choice. And 'technically kidnapping' was bullshit anyway.

Zach roused during final descent as his ears no doubt started popping and was fully alert by the time they landed, disembarking with quick eagerness. Daken gave the directions to their taxi in the Cantonese-Thai-English creole that was the common-denominator of Madripoor and sighed, leaning an elbow against the window-ledge. Anger had been replaced over the course of the trip with tired anxiety. After a few blocks, Zach turned from the window he'd been looking out of.

“Did you move?” he asked.

“I move all the time,” Daken shrugged. “We're not going to my condo. Don't worry, you'll like the new place. It's big and there's some other kids.”

“Other kids?” Zach asked, frowning. “I thought-- I thought it was gonna just be you and me. Like before. With no X-Men or- or siblings...”

Daken flinched and his stomach clenched. “Jimmy's dead. You'll have to settle for the gullible idiots who let his murderer escape.”

“Oh...” Zach chewed on his lip, looking confused and unhappy.

Daken reached out and patted his hair. “It's going to be great. Don't worry. And I can't vouch for the idiots, but I'm sure you'll like Nightshade. She's very sweet. In an endearingly creepy way... She doesn't live there, but she comes around.”

“Okay...” Zach nodded, not looking particularly mollified.

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“Briar said she can't find any definitive leads, and the possible leads are too numerous to vet with any efficiency,” Magnus sighed, shaking his head.

“What about... hacking?” Lorna asked, glancing at Danger. “She's got to have a digital footprint, right?”
“Following a 'digital footprint' rarely requires hacking, Lorna. And in the cases it does, I would first need to know where to look,” Danger replied. “I've searched all major government databases, but found no recent information on her. Most do not even know she was responsible for the bombs.”

“There is enough of Nathaniel Essex in her to be highly intelligent, competent and ruthless,” Magnus noted, looking tired and almost his real age. “But enough of Claudine Renko left to be far more cautious. She knows it was by pure luck and tenacity that she managed to escape... Jimmy had no way to know a stab through the heart wouldn't end her, but Emma certainly should have.”

“You think she let Miss Sinister escape?” Lorna asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I'm sure of it.” Magnus narrowed his eyes, and Lorna could have sworn the room got colder.

“Magnus, Daken has returned,” Danger announced suddenly.

“Daken?” Lorna looked up in surprise.

“Perfect,” Magnus said, rising to his feet and striding toward the door.

Lorna leapt up and chased after him, hearing Danger follow suit. “Father, did you call him?” she demanded. He should know better. They'd talked about this.

“No, my dear, but this is a gift-horse I've not the time or luxury to look in the mouth right now,” Magnus replied, breezing down the hall. As they approached the atrium, raised voices could be heard and they arrived to find the team accosting Daken and a boy who looked a couple years younger than Bobby.

“Well you should be!” Jean was not-quite-shouting at Daken.

“Jean, Jean, calm down,” Warren waved his hands in a settling manner. “Maybe we should just--”

“You don't even know what you're talking about!” the unfamiliar boy yelled back at Jean. “You're just a stupid bitch and nobody cares what you think!”

“Zach, you don't know that to be true, and don't swear unless you mean it,” Daken calmly reprimanded, before his face turned upward to look at them. “Sir, this is Zach. He needs sanctuary. He can be useful, he's an omega.”

“Whether he is useful or not is immaterial, Daken, for no mutant child shall ever be denied sanctuary here,” Magnus replied imperiously. “May I be so bold as to inquire why you left the school?”

“They don't want me. They just grudgingly tolerate me out of pity,” Daken scoffed. “And I'm wasted there. Give me a task. You won't be disappointed, Sir.”

“That is--” Magnus started as Lorna grabbed his arm and dug her fingers into it hard. He turned his head to give her an annoyed, questioning look.

“Danger, we're taking Daken and Zach home,” Lorna said firmly. “Would you please take them to the hanger and I'll meet you there in a few minutes?”

Danger raised a tungsten carbide eyebrow at her and nodded. “Of course,” she said and started toward the stairs as Lorna pulled Magnus toward the nearest door. She could hear Daken shouting indignant protests at her but didn't pay attention because she knew he'd be thoroughly handled
without her help. Of everyone here, Danger was the only one she trusted to be able to take Daken down without getting hurt or destroying the building.

“Lorna,” Magnus growled softly as she pulled him into the room at the top of the stairs and shut the door behind them. “Explain yourself.”

“Daken is going back to the school,” Lorna said, turning to glare at him. “He needs help. That is the only place he might ever get it.”

“What he needs is a task, Lorna. A sense of accomplishment,” Magnus argued. “He wants to serve the mutant cause and--”

“No, he wants to serve you,” Lorna corrected. “Were you even listening to him? ‘You won't be disappointed, Sir.’” She glared hard into her father's eyes. “That is a boy who wants you to pat him on the head and say you're proud of him.”

Magnus was silent for a few seconds, staring evenly back at her. “If that's what he requires, I can provide.”

“Like you did so well with Pietro?!” Lorna demanded, furious that he could even say that.

Magnus grimaced. “Pietro is an impetuous idiot, with a skill for slamming his head into walls,” he replied coldly. “Daken is intelligent, competent and rational.”

“He just threw a tantrum and ran away from home because they were being mean to him!” Lorna snapped.

They glared at each other for a few more seconds and then Magnus pursed his lips and his gaze fluttered downward. “... I take your point,” he said quietly.

“I'm taking him home. It's what he needs, and if he stayed here, you'd lose patience with him in a week,” Lorna said firmly, swallowing back her anger.

“You're right, Lorna,” Magnus agreed, closing his eyes. “I was thinking purely in the tactical. Your judgment in this matter is better than mine.”

Lorna felt a little stunned at that but pushed it away and nodded curtly. “Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

This is gonna be a two-parter.

Important: I do not denigrate the perfection of idiot-pouches. They're awesome. They go right in the microwave! Y'all can't do that with a can.

I decided I don't want to wait another two weeks, month, or several to find out how Blue resolves Magneto's latest personal crisis/vendetta. Writing here with the conceit that status quo is the story-franchise equivalent of the law of gravity, but if not, meh, I'm canon-divergent anyway.
I decided I needed the grownups to be having some sort of strategy meeting, and I was trying to think of some tactical thing they could be discussing, then I was like "Miss Sinister! She's been stabbed by three out of four Sniklings at this point, and she always manages to crawl away." So that seemed like a good thing to be worrying Magneto.
Don't worry, Gabby, I'm sure you'll get to stab her soon...
Lorna stepped back out onto the balcony overlooking the atrium and froze, staring down at the scene below. Jean and Bobby were in a screaming match with the teenager Daken had brought. Daken had his claws out, Scott was standing straight-backed and glaring him down from a few yards away, but nobody was getting closer or launching any attacks. Hank was sitting on the floor, looking drawn, and Warren's wings had gone out. And Danger was nowhere in sight, but the floor of the atrium was strewn with little pieces of machinery.

“... Danger,” Lorna whispered, staring in horror at all the tiny gears and springs littering the room. “WHAT DID YOU DO?!” she screamed and all eyes turned to her.

“Th-the robot-lady attacked us!” Zach stammered defensively, taking a step backward.


The boy bit his lip and lifted his arms slightly, then half a second later Daken grabbed his shoulder. “Zach, no. Don't hurt her.”

'Hurt her'? The boy was responsible for all this? Daken had said he was an omega...

“B-but...” Zach mumbled, taking another step back.

“He took our powers,” Scott said grimly, turning his head to look at Lorna. “And Danger... fell apart.”

Lorna stared at him for a moment as her feet touched down on the tile floor, before rounding on the boy again. “Fix her!” she demanded, lifting the pieces of Danger into the air, partly to pull them closer together in the hopes of helping her reform, partly to be menacing.

“Now,” Daken said softly.

Zach grinned, and the next moment, Danger's pieces were hitting the floor again as a waive of vertigo and confusion washed over Lorna. She couldn't feel where she was. North had disappeared. Lorna put a hand to her head and stumbled, unsure of her balance.

“You- you don't tell... tell us what... to do...” Zach said, voice wavering. His face was pale and sweaty.

Lorna saw Daken frown, worry crossing his brow. “... That's enough, Zach.”

“Y-yeah. Showed you who's boss. You- you don't... Let'cha off easy, 'cause- 'cause... but you don't...” Zach's eyes rolled back and he started to tip over as Daken darted forward, catching the boy before he could hit the floor.

Lorna could suddenly feel the room again, the pulse of the planet under her feet, and the charge of the atmosphere above her head. At the same moment, she heard Jean give a guttural snarl and saw her lift a few inches off the ground, hair and clothes fluttering as TK energy swirled around her. “You overreaching little fiend!”
“Please return to your affairs, children. The situation is now in hand,” Danger's voice cut in, and all the pieces of her started swirling toward the center of the room and lifting up like an inverted whirlpool. Within seconds she was taking form, into a nightmare spider-octopus.

“DON'T TOUCH ME!” Daken shouted, moving backwards while holding Zach protectively and glaring up at her.

“Please accompany me to the hanger, Daken,” Danger said and grabbed him.

Daken glared out the window, arms crossed, seething. He hadn't so much been shoved into the plane, as the plane had built itself around him after dragging him to the hanger. He'd initially been held in place in his seat, but the restraints had dissolved back into the overall substrate once they'd taken off and escape became if not impossible, then inadvisable. Zach was cradled in the reclined seat next to him, still out cold, and even if he hadn't been, disabling a super-sonic vehicle that was brushing the upper atmosphere would not have been a brilliant plan.

“Oh stop it,” Lorna clucked, sitting in the seat facing him.

“You're driving me home like some misbehaved teenager,” Daken growled.

“I'm 'driving you home' like a friend who cares that you're trying to make a very bad choice,” Lorna corrected pedantically.

“He's your father,” Daken snapped, turning his head to glare at her.

“Yes. He is,” Lorna agreed, glaring back. “And I would think that you should know, better than most, that being a father doesn't make someone right. Or even compassionate.” Her brow pinched and her lips pursed for a moment. “He doesn't care about you, Daken. He sees you as a resource.”

A more useful resource than her. She was a redundancy, and Magneto had only really needed her to sucker Havoc. “I didn't come asking for a hug, I was asking for a damn job,” Daken snarled, turning his eyes back toward the window.

“You were asking for validation,” Lorna shot back. “… Where's Laura? Did you call her?”

“If you're not a child, then stop yelling and try to act like a rational adult!” Lorna snapped. A few minutes passed in silence as Daken gritted his teeth and glared at the clouds. Lorna sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “… Where's Laura?” she asked again, softly.

“… On a mission. Radio-silent.”

Lorna was quiet again for a moment and then pulled out a phone and started poking at it.

“Who are you texting?” Daken demanded, turning to glare at her again, suspicious.

“While the party-line may consider me to have gone over to 'the dark side' lately, I still have contacts among the 'good guys',” Lorna replied, failing entirely to answer.

“So, what? Are you tattling on me to your ass-hole ex?” Daken demanded.

Lorna paused, frowning and glanced up at him. “Is my 'ass-hole ex' the reason you're in such a
snit?” she asked.

Daken narrowed his eyes and snarled at her. “You insufferable casuist. A snit’? Could you possibly be a little more pedantic??”

“This is a snit, Daken. This is the definition of snit,” Lorna retorted, glaring right back. “You ran away because you were hurt and angry. Running errands for my father is a bandaid to cover MRSA. You think a pat on the head and a 'good boy' is going to make you feel better? Daken, he cannot help you, he cannot be what you need.”

“I don't--”

“He is hurt and broken and tired of life and he is hiding it from the world behind charisma,” Lorna cut him off. “Just like you.”

Daken stared at her for a few seconds, trembling with fury, then turned his face to the window again, glaring out at the endless sky, and resolved not to let her play therapist anymore. He could handle awkward silence. After a minute, Lorna went back to playing with her phone.

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“Should we... 'hail' or, mm,” Lorna asked as they approached Central Park.

“I have already pinged the Institute's defense grid and it has cleared me to land,” Danger replied.

“Good,” Lorna nodded, pleased. Occasionally inconsistently-reliable people could be reliable. She watched out the windshield and waited as Danger shifted to vertical landing mode and dropped down into the hanger next to the X-Men's blackbird, then unbuckled and pushed herself out of her seat. “Come on, Mister Silent-Treatment,” she called, walking back through the main section of the plane, past her temporary charges and toward the ramp.

She heard Daken make an indignant noise and Zach swear under his breath, but they were accompanied by sounds of buckles opening. As she descended the ramp, she found Kitty and Remy standing at the base and Lorna smiled, tired relief settling in like a hot toddy. “Thanks Remy,” she said quietly as she reached them and turned to Kitty. “Hi.”

“Thank you,” Kitty said with a little nod, stress written across her brow.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Daken demanded behind her, accompanied by the sounds of Danger reconfiguring herself.

“Mon frère, what is Laura gon' say when she hears you gave up on yourself?” Remy asked, flashing over-dramatic worry at him.

Daken stepped up next to Lorna so he could shoot a glare at her. “You called in the Cajun. What do you think this is supposed to accomplish?” he demanded.

“Daken,” Remy moved forward and clapped his hands around Daken's shoulders, standing toe to toe and giving him a serious look. “Laura and Gabby, they believe in you. They believe you want t'get better, and they believe you're strong enough. You gon' say they be wrong?” he asked, voice turning to soft butter.

Daken narrowed his eyes. “... Do you really want to play this game, Gambit? I will win,” he warned.
Remy let go of him and grinned, giving an exaggerated shrug. “Fair,” he said. “But you still sign yourself up for a come-t’Jesus, so how ’bout we get it over with?”

“I'm already here, aren't I,” Daken snarled, pushing past him and storming toward the elevator. “So you can go now. You're not needed.”

“We gon’ talk, Daken,” Remy said firmly, following after him. “You think I'm gon' let those girls be upset with me? Nuh'uh, frère.”

Zach tried to give chase only to have both Kitty and Lorna grab an arm in a movement that couldn't have been more synchronized if they'd choreographed it. “Hey!” he turned a glare on Kitty.

“You're expected in detention, Zach,” she said, glaring right back. Zach probably believed that his pout looked very serious and intimidating. Kitty and Lorna continued to hold him in place until Daken had disappeared into the elevator with Remy, apparently satisfied that Zach was in no danger here and needing to attend to his own sulking.

“What happened?” Kitty asked, turning to Lorna after the elevator doors had closed.

“He came to Madripoor by commercial airline and asked Magnus to assign him meaningful tasks,” Danger replied.

“Did he happen to say why?” she asked.

“Well, he seems to be angry at Bobby,” Lorna offered with a little shrug.

“... Okay, I know why,” Kitty groaned. She looked as if she were fighting a migraine for a moment before she scowled, eyes raising to the ceiling as she lifted her hands, fingers hooked. “Kkkkkkkghkkghkgh!” She screwed her eyes shut and dropped her hands, sighing exasperatedly, “... I'm going to institute a time-out-chair policy. That seems like the most reasonable thing to do.”

“I am not going to disagree, but I would like to have a talk with him, if I may,” Lorna said.

“Please, be my guest,” Kitty said, whisking her hand through the air in a sardonic welcoming gesture, before catching Zach's shoulder and towing the furiously sulking and muttering boy toward the elevator.

Lorna glanced at Danger while they waited for it to come back down. “I need a few minutes, or a half hour, or... I don't know how long I'll need,” she sighed, shaking her head.

“I will visit Georgia,” Danger decided with a curt nod.

“Okay, cool. I'll check in when I'm done with another 'you're too old for this' ass-kicking,” Lorna said, watching the doors open again. “Maybe we could take Georgia out for an early dinner or something.”

“I will extend the offer.”

They parted when the elevator reached the upper floors and Lorna made her way to Bobby's office. She gave the door a knock and it was quickly met by Kurt's voice calling cheerfully back, “Please come in!” She pushed the door open and stepped inside, spotting Bobby first (leaning heavily on an elbow and glaring at his computer screen) before turning to the left and spotting Kurt, who brightened and got up from his chair. “Lorna!” he greeted with a grin.

She heard Bobby start but didn't look back at him as she smiled and nodded to Kurt. “Hi, Kurt.
How have you been?” she asked.

“Just excellent. Good, very good. And yourself?” he asked, hopping over the desk and taking both her hands, holding them for a moment as he gave her a warm smile.

“Ups and downs, but I go to bed at night feeling like I'm making a difference,” Lorna replied.

“Wunderbar. This is how it should be,” he said, smile widening. “And you are as lovely as ever, of course. But to what do we owe the pleasure?”

“Seems you misplaced some things. I brought them back,” Lorna said. “They were kicking and screaming, but they seem to have resigned themselves now.”

“Ah. Good. Good. We were concerned,” Kurt said, nodding quickly and managing to look both uncomfortable and relieved.

Lorna half-turned to look at Bobby and found him staring back at her, slight pinch to his brow. “It's nice to see you, Kurt, but if you don't mind, I'm going to steal Bobby for a bit.”

“Of course not.” He let go of her hands and stepped back. “It is good to see you well. I hope that we may see more of you, I find no reason for unpleasantness between our tribes.”

“I appreciate the thought and agree,” Lorna nodded then looked at Bobby again. “Can we talk, please?”

He pursed his lips for a moment and pushed away from his desk, walking over and following her reluctantly out of the office. He had the air of a child dawdling because they knew they were on their way to a scolding. “What about?”

“Somewhere private, please?”

“... Yeah. I haven't cleaned in a while, so, fair warning,” Bobby sighed, stepping up and leading her to one of the side stairs and up a level. Lorna drifted beside him, silently thinking through what she wanted to say as she was ushered into Bobby's suite and the door pulled shut behind them. “So am I getting a chewing out because this is my fault for some reason?” he asked as soon as the door was shut.

“... Daken showed up in Madripoor asking my father to give him orders,” Lorna said quietly.

“And that's my fault,” Bobby snapped.

“Is it?” Lorna turned and looked at him carefully. “You're pretty defensive, before the conversation even started.”

“You pulled me aside to talk privately and I'm somehow self-obsessed for thinking it might somehow be related to me?” Bobby demanded, hackles up and agitated like few subjects ever got him.

“... He's mad at you about something,” Lorna noted.

“And obviously, since he's such a completely reasonable person, I must have done something terrible!”

“Bobby,” Lorna frowned at him. “It is pure luck that I was there when he came to fling his desperate need for validation at my father. If I hadn't been there to shut it down, he'd already be on
some kind of covert mission.”

“And you decided to chew me out, why? Why am I responsible for this?” Bobby glared at her.

Lorna stared blankly back for a few seconds before walking closer, until they were barely a foot apart. “... You were absolutely wretched to Alex,” she said quietly and watched confusion flicker through Bobby's eyes. “You challenged, undermined, snipped and were just unpleasant to him at every possible opportunity. You tried to take whatever you possibly could away from him, and you looked for any way you could find to make him doubt himself.”

“What does this even--”

Lorna laid a hand quickly over his mouth. “... Bobby, you are a god-damned ass-hole when you have a crush,” she said quietly. She watched the color drain out of his face. “... And I can see why you weren't able to admit what your 'problem' with Alex was back then, but why now? You've come to terms with yourself, so why is being attracted to Daken so uncomfortable for you to admit?” She dropped her hand, laying it on his arm instead.

They stared at each other for a few seconds, then Bobby started to blink quickly and glanced away, flushing as hints of shame played across his features. “That's not-- It's different,” he whispered. He stared at nothing for a minute and then a fresh look of horror dawned on him and his eyes snapped back to Lorna's. “Does Alex...?”

“I don't think he's that perceptive,” Lorna shook her head. “And this conversation won't leave the room.”

“... Thank you,” Bobby whispered, looking away again.

“Bobby?” Lorna called, catching his chin and trying to pull him back. “Why are you ashamed about having feelings for Daken?” she asked again.

“Well, gee, where to start?” Bobby hissed, letting his face be turned back toward her but keeping his eyes averted. “How about that he tried to kill my first boyfriend?”

“You tried to kill Earth when you were in the same shoes,” Lorna scoffed.

“... It's complicated.”

“Why? Because he's Logan's son?” Lorna asked, studying him. “Or because he's a 'villain'?”

“... I- I don't...” Bobby's voice was whiny now, faltering.

“... Do you know what my father had to promise him to conscript Daken a few months ago?” Lorna asked quietly, letting her eyes drift down for a moment, gazing unfocused at Bobby's collar.

“What?” he asked, a slight edge returning.

“Nothing,” Lorna whispered. “... He had gifts and grandiose promises prepared... But as soon as he reached out, when he sent Brier to make the pitch, Daken was already onboard.”

“... I've seen the swords,” Bobby murmured.

Lorna smirked slightly. “He likes the swords,” she said, nodding. “... But they were just icing to him... All he needed was hearing that he had been asked for. Not Logan or Laura's runner-up. Not 'discount Wolverine'. Him. Daken... My father reached out to him and told him that he was wanted.
“And I'm a jerk because I sent his fragile ego running back to Magneto,” Bobby snorted softly.

“Well, yes,” Lorna agreed. “But also? I think you put a mental label on Daken without knowing anything about him,” she said, glancing up, trying to make eye-contact again but he was still looking away. “I mean, obviously you're not the only one, that's been pretty close to universal. But Bobby, I fought next to him. I watched him help his teammates. I saw him try to soothe and contain mutants whose powers had gone out of control. I saw him protect the humans being threatened by it all. I listened to him pout and whine when he was afraid of disappointing my father... He's not a bad person, Bobby. I've seen it for myself.”

“... So you're saying I should stop being mean to him,” Bobby said softly.

“You should stop being mean to him, and you should stop torturing yourself,” Lorna agreed. “... But he's probably way out of your league anyway,” she added with a little smirk.

Bobby finally looked back down at her. “Thhhhanks.”

Lorna patted his cheek. “Poor baby.”

Chapter End Notes

When I realized that Zach would be a huge obstacle to Danger trying to wrangle Daken, I was all annoyed, thinking "how am I going to make this happen?" But then when I started actually writing the scene and it just flowed naturally. He's trying to tie up the powers of four omegas, plus three more hostiles, that is just too much strain for the kid. So yay, worked out perfectly.

Gambit's hypnotic-voice cantrip powers seem to come and go depending on who's writing him, but they're officially listed in his stats. *shrug* However they are definitely a level-0 trick, so Daken would trump in the 'charm powers' arena. (Gambit is totally bard-class.)

I fix Bobby's too-quick-to-get-mean behavior from the millennium era X-Men and Grace's run with the same head-canon. Bobby with a crush is worst-Bobby. Thought about waiting until next week to post this, but then I was like "nah."
Daken lead Remy right into his own suite in the staff dormitory hall. In the practical sense, it was about privacy, and not wishing to hold their conversation in a public space, but as a man who had occasionally travelled in similar professional circles to Daken’s, Remy recognized the choice of venue for the gesture of trust that it was. He followed along in respectful silence as Daken walked across the front room and dropped himself into a suede couch with a little less grace than usual, looking emotionally and actually exhausted.

“You don’t look your freshest. Di’n’t sleep?” Remy asked, tilting his head and making a show of sweeping his eyes over Daken head-to-toe.

“I was on a plane. The roar of the air circulation irritates me,” Daken replied. “And as soon as I got where I was going, Dane decided to shove me inside of her plane-woman for the return trip.”

“She can get pretty bossy sometime,” Remy chuckled and settled down next to him. “But I think she jus’ tryin’ to look out for you. Her papa’s a wanted terrorist in most countries in the world and ‘ssociating wit’ him likely to ruin your chances here.”

“Has it occurred to you that I left because I don’t want to be here?” Daken growled at him.

“You want t’be able t’see your family at your leisure?” Remy countered, raising an eyebrow. “Laura wants that.”

“Shut up,” Daken said with less venom.

“So you talk then,” Remy said. “Tell me what this was all about.”

“Why does it have to be about something?”

“Daken, you grabbed a kid --”

“I promised not to leave him behind again,” Daken cut him off, and there was stress in his voice. Fatigue seemed to be causing him trouble with the emotions he’d normally keep suppressed; Remy could feel the phantom of them prickling at him.

“... That’s a hell of a promise for you,” he noted quietly. “Seem to remember Laura tellin’ me she couldn’t even gechya t’call and say you ain’t dead once a week.”

Daken was silent for a while before responding, “Laura doesn’t need me.”

“Huh,” Remy studied him thoughtfully. “An’ this kid does?”

Daken shook his head, annoyance returning. “I made a bad decision in the moment. That’s all.”

“Alrigh’,” Remy shrugged.

“They’re not going to let me anywhere near him again,” Daken added, voice and expression darkening again.

Remy felt a weight in his chest as the contagious nature of Daken’s emotions made itself again
known in the absence of his usual careful control. “Maybe, maybe not,” he said noncommittally. “But I still wan’ t’know why you split in the firs’ place.”

“Because this is pointless ,” Daken bit back. “Pointless and annoying .”

“Lorna think you’re mad at Bobby abou’ something,” Remy prodded.

Daken gave an irritated scoff, shaking his head and then leaning it back against the plush suede. “He got a bit snappish. Pointed out that I’m a joke and I did everything to myself .”

“... I bet he didn’t say it all like that ,” Remy said, frowning.

“Of course not. He’s not articulate enough to be so concise.”

“Daken, you don’t want him gettin’ feisty, then stop yankin’ on his damn pigtails,” Remy snorted, rolling his eyes. “You wan’ t’flirt with the boy, try bein’ sweet . I know you know how.”

Daken gave an irritated huff. “It’s irrelevant. He’s just a symptom of the greater reality.” He rubbed his hands over his face. “This, all of this, I just… I don’t want to be here.”

“Thought you wanted to be closer to the girls.”

“Laura and Gabby aren’t here ,” Daken snapped. “A bunch of morons chasing the false ideals of a hypocrite are.”

“They’re close though,” Remy replied with a shrug. “An’ your father--”

“ Stop it.”

Remy sighed, leaning back into the plush couch and chewing on his lip a moment as he thought. “Don’t think you’ve been round to see Johnny again,” he noted.

That earned a little snarl. “Does it even concern you that your lovely bride is stealing my boyfriend?”

“Obviously it concern me! Stealin’ is my job,” Remy protested. “An’ also, ‘boyfriend’? I was under the ‘pression the two of you hadn’ seen each other in, what, three years?”

Daken glowered silently at him.

Remy sighed and put a hand on Daken’s shoulder. “I know tha’ boy has a lot of feelin’s about you, an’ seem like you’ve got a lot of feelin’s about him. But, Daken...” Remy faltered slightly and took a deep breath. “If you was close... he tell you about the skrull?”

Daken was still and very silent for a few seconds, before turning a burning glare on Remy. “... Why do you know about her?” he hissed, grabbing Remy’s wrist and twisting as he pulled it away from his shoulder. “So it’s not just Rogue, you’re just one of those couples.”

“I did no’ touch him, Daken,” Remy growled, glaring right back.

The looks-to-kill contest continued for a while before Daken relented, letting Remy go and returning to his morose slump. “You’d better not,” he scoffed softly.

“The man’s a professional patsy , frère. I wouldn’ trust myself with him anyway,” Remy sighed, shaking his head. “Just like you don’ trust yourself there… You fell for the mark, an’ now you don’t want t’hurt him, but you know you can’t help it. A snake bites an’ a scorpion stings.”
“Stop calling me an animal,” Daken snapped.

“I wasn’t.” Remy let his head drop back against the couch and closed his eyes, mulling through what to say. He rolled his head to the side and opened his eyes to look at Daken. “You know it’s no good, right? You’re just arguin’ cause it hurts t’know?” A moment later, he bit down on his lip as he felt the wave of depression rolling off of Daken.

“... I don’t want to be his next abuser,” he whispered hollowly.

“I know,” Remy said softly and shifted closer, putting an arm around Daken. “I know, frère.” Daken didn’t shrug him off and a few minutes of quiet slid past. It was broken by a knock on the door.

“It’s Rachel,” Rachel’s voice came through a mini-speaker hidden in the trim.

“Let her in,” Daken called.

The door unlatched itself and Rachel pushed it in, coming one step into the room and pausing. “You up for take-out and Harlots tonight?” she asked, looking at Daken.

“Damn, you havin’ some interestin’ parties!” Remy laughed.

“It’s a show,” Daken said, rolling his eyes.

“The show is the first hour. The second hour is listening to Daken and Dani argue historical accuracy versus intellectual accuracy versus cultural significance within a historical and modern context,” Rachel explained, a tiny smirked caught on the corner of her lips.

“Sounds stimulatin’,” Remy grinned.

“We’re doing Thai tonight,” Rachel said, turning her eyes back to Daken. “What’s your order?”

“Pad prik king, chicken, four stars,” Daken replied.

“Cool. See you at six.” Rachel stepped out and pulled the door shut.

Remy turned his grin on Daken. “… You’re makin’ friends.”

“Shut up.”

“Who else you do ‘Harlots an’ take-out’ with?” he asked.

Daken heaved a sigh. “… Jubilee and Saint Croix.”

“Girls night in, huh?”

Daken gave a loud scoff. “Yes, and then we paint each other’s nails and braid each other’s hair.”

“I don’ believe that for a minute. You only let a professional touch your nails.”

That earned him a small chuckle.

“Daken…” Remy murmured, sobering. “Just because you ain’t in his bed don’t mean you gotta ghost Johnny.”

Daken’s face fell again and he looked away. “Stay out of it.”
“I can’t. I *live* with it,” Remy protested. “And anyway, it look like maybe you’re gettin’ the hang of friendship. Give it a try, the boy needs friends.”

Daken made an irritated sound.

“You think on it,” Remy said, pushing himself to his feet. “Next time you need to be somewhere else, you give me a call. We go get drinks. Or maybe do a heist. That’d be fun, no?”

“Get lost already,” Daken sighed.

Remy paused, trying to decide if Daken was annoyed at him for going. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not, but I’ll settle for knowin’ you ain’t mad at me, and you still be here when Laura get back,” Remy replied.

Daken looked at him silently for a minute before answering. “I’m not angry and I’ll still be here.”

“Okay. Good,” Remy nodded. “I see you later then. Get some rest.”

“Yep,” Daken agreed, running a hand through his hair. “Bye.”

“Bye,” Remy echoed, going to the door and glancing back once more before leaving. He pulled the door shut and then headed up the hallway toward the offices. Making his way to the central one, he knocked on the door and waited for a voice to call back at him from inside, before pushing it open and walking in. “Kitty, I was hopin’ for a quick word.”

“Sure. What’s going on with Daken?” she asked, standing up from her desk.

“Growin’ pains,” Remy replied, shaking his head, then he bit his lip for a moment and looked her in the eye. “Kitty, you remember Sammy?”

“Sammy?” she gave him a confused look.

“Sammy Paré?”

Kitty stared at him a moment. “… Yeah, of course I do. What-- where’s this coming from?”

“I remember that for a few months there, old Juggernaut was tryin’ real hard. Sammy gave him a reason to try,” Remy said carefully, watching expressions flicker across her face. “Then Sammy got taken away, an’ he didn’t have a reason to try no more.”

Kitty frowned for a moment. “Is this about Zach?” she asked.

Remy sighed and shrugged. “I don’t know why he picked this kid, but I think maybe Zach is part of the reason Daken’s here right now,” he said. “His family’s part of it, but so’s Zach. Don’t go takin’ any reasons away from him, okay?”

Kitty rubbed her hands over her face, making a little, frustrated sound. “… I’ll talk it over with Rachel,” she said.

“Merci, ma Chaton,” Remy said, giving her a smile. “I let you get back to work now.”

“Take care, Gambit.”
Dialogue-heavy (dialogue-exclusive?) chapter is so all over the place, I had trouble picking a song for it, and ended up going with one that felt more tone-appropriate rather than lyrics-appropriate. I don't have any profound words to say for this chapter note, so I'll just explain the obscure(?) references made within.

Remy's mention of a skrull was a reference to Lyja, Johnny's ex-wife (do we still say 'ex-wife' when it's an annulment rather than a divorce?) who married him under a false persona, got back together with him multiple times under multiple false personas and pretended to be pregnant with his child twice when her personas were discovered to be false. She is his long-time stalker/psychological-abuser. Add to the list both Amaquelin sisters now. Crystal treated both Johnny and Pietro like objects, and until recently, my interpretation of that might have been that Crystal was awful, but having Medusa in there actually makes it a bit more interesting, especially because of the manner in which she dumped Johnny: she decided she didn't need him anymore and he was dismissed. The Amaquelin sisters were born as the aristocracy of a rigid caste system which believed strongly that people were born into that caste that they deserved. The Amaquelin sisters were taught growing up that other people were born to serve them. Now, on an intellectual level, obviously they don't believe this because they have both worked hard to dismantle that system, however there are aspects of that early childhood education that would be ingrained in them at an instinctive level. When they actively think about class and servitude, they think it's wrong, but their instinct when they're not actively thinking about it is to treat the little people as servants.

Before any of you have to run over to the Wikia asking "Who the hell is Sammy Paré?" it's Squid-Boy. Remember Squid-Boy? It's okay if you don't, he died of failing-to-engage-the-audience (now that's a real death, there's no coming back from that.) His only plot-relevance was playing Juggernaut's morality-pet. For a few years they were trying to give Juggernaut a character-arch and he was briefly on an X-Men team and then Excalibur. After that run of Excalibur ended, he fell into a plot-hole and came out of it apparently a villain again with no satisfactory explanation. Now, normally it's really annoying when the writers strip away all of a character's personal growth and effectively erase their character-arch, but in Juggernaut's case, both the redemption-arch and the re-villaining can add up to an interesting aspect of his character, namely: Juggernaut does what he's told. Whoever happens to find him when he's adrift and tells him "I'm your friend and you should do this," basically has a leash on him from that moment forward. The period in which he was a 'good guy', started after Black Tom got gone because of fucking around with science-magic, and a 12-13 year old started calling the shots over him (without actually understanding that he was doing so) and telling him "you should be a hero because it would be super cool!" During the arch in which Sammy died, Juggernaut ended up getting weird-teleported to England in the company of TJ (from Exiles) and at that point TJ ended up being his morality-pet. Then she left this universe and the next time we see Juggernaut, he's being bullied back into villain status by super-heroes-gone-insane and/or Charles Xavier (who, let's face it, is secretly a super-villain with good publicity).
Daken is all f*cked-up and Logan is worried.

Chapter Notes

**Spoiler Warning** for The Adamantium Agenda, Weapon Lost and The Claws of a Killer (mostly this one).

**Time Stamp:**
This takes place before ALL of the previous chapters.

**Trigger Warnings:**
- Altered psychological state (fucked-up)
- Post brain-washing
- Unnamed-character deaths

Logan heard footsteps coming up the hall outside his cell, as well as the sound of something being dragged, a body. He didn’t care. He stayed where he was, crouched in the corner of his cot, staring at nothing. Then he heard the steps stop in front of his door, and a moment later, it opened. Logan glanced up, impassively watching as two guards dragged in a man dressed in the kind of crinkly, chemical-smelling clothes Logan was made to wear when he was taken to the operation room. They dropped him on the floor and then turned and left.

Logan stared at the motionless man, frowning slightly. The situation was odd, new, but the man himself smelled familiar somehow, his scent tickled at the dark void in his mind where a part of Logan told him something ought to be. His eyes were wandering over the distinctive hair and black ink curling down his arm when Logan heard the man sniff, then his eyes opened a fraction but he didn’t move more than that. Logan stayed silent, watching, listening, smelling, and minutes passed.

“... Daddy?” the man on the floor whispered.

Logan drew a sharp breath as something inside of him broke. Shattered pieces started tumbling out of the void. And a name. Itsu. The man on the floor was Itsu’s son. Itsu’s stolen hopes and dreams. Logan had failed him. Given up on him. Abandoned him. Again and again and again. And now he was collapsed like a rag-doll on a concrete floor, apparently somewhat aware of his surroundings but completely motionless, his pulse and breath in some nebulous region between conscious and unconscious. He didn’t smell like injury, but something was wrong with him.

Logan uncurled himself and slid off the cot, inching cautiously closer. His boy (what was his name?) didn’t move or react. Logan knelt down next to him. “... What’s wrong?”

“I’m dead,” his boy answered quietly.

“No, ya ain’t,” Logan said, hesitantly reaching out and putting a hand on his shoulder.

He didn’t react to the touch. “Yes. I died. You’re dead too. We’re dead,” the boy corrected. His eyes were still half open, completely unfocused, and his face was devoid of expression. “Is mother here...?”
“... No.”

“She’s somewhere better,” the boy whispered, seeming satisfied with that.

“Kid, ya ain’t dead,” Logan told him again.

“... I was always dead,” the boy mumbled, closing his eyes. “I died in mother’s womb, before I could be born.”

Logan stared down at him silently for a while. He couldn’t honestly tell the boy he was wrong about that. He still wasn’t moving at all; he easily could have been asleep. Logan pursed his lips, debating for a few moments, and then shifted and slid his hands under the boy, tugging him closer. The boy stayed rag-doll limp as he was pulled against Logan’s chest. Logan held him there quietly, and the boy didn’t try to pull away or give any indication of being aware that he’d been repositioned.

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“It was a dead-end,” Laura announced as she arrived back in the assembly hall, which sometimes took on the moniker and function of war-room. “The auction was unrelated. It lead me to Sinister, but he doesn’t have him.”

Kitty’s eyes squeezed shut and her brow pinched as she breathed out a frustrated sound. “... Okay,” she said, and then bit her lip for a moment. “Crossing things off is progress.”

A hand landed on Laura’s shoulder, and she had to remind herself not to squirm. Jubilee’s scent had changed, and while it was certainly a good change, it required some getting used to. “How you two holding up?” she asked softly, stepping up behind Laura and Gabby, putting an arm around each of them.

“As well as can be expected,” Laura sighed, shaking her head.

“I like your cool, matching katanas,” Jubilee said, giving her a slightly strained smile. “The to-scale thing is a nice touch.”

“This one’s a wakizashi,” Gabby explained, patting the handle of the shortsword at her hip. “It’s traditionally for jabs and blocking in a two-handed technique.”

“So this is supposed to be a set?” Jubilee asked curiously, raising an eyebrow.

“I didn’t study niten,” Laura replied with a shrug. “They’re not ours, we’re just keeping them safe.”

“Gotcha,” Jubilee nodded. She kept her arms around their shoulders as they turned their attention back toward the more pertinent discussion.

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The door opened again. Logan didn’t look up as three people came in. Two were guards. He recognized the third’s scent as a doctor. He could hear the guards wheeling a stretcher in with them. “That will do, Wolverine,” the doctor said sternly down at him.

“What did you do to him? Kid ain’t right,” Logan said, not moving, keeping the boy cradled against him, not looking up.

“That will do, Wolverine,” the doctor repeated, getting annoyed.
“Somethin’s wrong with him.”

“He’s ill. We’ll fix him, but I had to consult with the other physicians because his physiology is resistant to standard treatments,” the doctor answered. He wasn’t supposed to answer. Nobody was supposed to tell Logan anything. But up to now they’d had him trained like a good dog and he hadn’t asked.

“What are you goin’ ta do to him?” Logan asked, finally looking up, keeping his grip on the boy.

“That is no concern of yours. Drop it, and go to your bed,” the doctor said, glaring down at him.

Logan just stared up at him and didn’t move.

The doctor made an irritated sound. “Take him,” he ordered the guards. They started to move, and Logan pulled the boy tighter against him, giving them a vicious snarl and a loud growl. They hesitated and the doctor scoffed in exasperation. He just wanted to get this done with. Good. “Electro-convulsive treatment has been recommended.”

Logan stared at him silently for a second and then nodded. “... Okay,” he said quietly, loosening his arms and carefully lowering the boy back down to the floor. The boy’s eyes opened slightly, his brow pinched and his pulse sped up just slightly. He was scared. Scared he was being abandoned again. Logan calmly pushed himself to his feet, and then in one fluid motion slammed a fist into the nearer guard and popped his claws through the man’s chest.

The doctor let out a startled yelp and stumbled back as the second guard lifted his rifle and fired two bullets through Logan before having his neck cut, not cleanly cleaved, but most of the important stuff split apart. The doctor was just drawing a breath to scream when Logan’s claws took tore up his entire trachea in an upward swipe. All three of them crumpled to the floor one by one, twitching and gushing. They’d left the door wide open. It had been months and Logan had never made a run for it when it was open. They’d taken that for granted.

He reached down and grabbed the boy by his arms, pulling on him. “Come on, boy,” he called, dragging him off the floor and pulling the boy’s right arm around his shoulders.

“No...” the boy whispered, a little edge of a whine to it.

“Come on. We can’t stay here,” Logan said, putting an arm around his waist and pulling him out the door. Despite his quiet protest, the boy supported his own weight and let himself be guided quickly down the hall. Before they reached the end of it, alarms started wailing and red lights started flashing. “Fuck,” Logan hissed and dragged the boy into a run.

Half a dozen guards appeared around the corner at the end of the hall and Logan swore again, cutting left, down another corridor. They were close to the center of the complex, nowhere near an exterior wall. They couldn’t get out. It was too fortified. Too many guards to fight through, and the boy was in no condition to help. Ahead of him, two doctors came out of one of the doors, eyes wide, looking to see what all the fuss was about. Their eyes got wider and they tried to run back in, but they weren’t fast enough. Logan plowed through them and into the lab they’d come from, slamming the door shut behind him.

The three doctors still inside stared at him, going pale and stinking of terror. Logan dropped the boy, not taking the time to set him down gently or pay attention to how he fell. He healed didn’t he? He thought the boy healed. Logan launched himself at the doctors and cut all of them down in under a minute before turning back around. The boy hadn’t gone completely rag-doll this time. He was sitting-- not ‘up’ exactly, but close enough. Logan ran to one of the semi-portable metal
counters and dragged it in front of the door. Then he went for one of the locker-cabinets and threw it down against the counter before going back to the boy’s side and crouching down.

“... We’re nowhere near an exit,” Logan told him quietly, trying to keep his voice calm as he laid a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “We gotta get through a lot of halls, and once we’re outside, there’s acres of flat before we hit the treeline.” He reached up with the other hand and stroked it over the boy’s cheek then cupped his neck. “I can’t drag you. You gotta run and you gotta fight. We don’t get out of here, they’re goin’ ta hurt’chya some more.”

The boy stared at him silently for a moment and then lifted a loose fist. He extended one claw, and as Logan watched it rang familiar. The boy’s middle claw was different from his. He’d known this before... before. For a moment, Logan thought the gesture was an acknowledgment, an affirmative, to what Logan had said. Then the boy pulled up his shirt, turned the claw on himself and sank it a few inches into his own guts.

“No!” Logan gasped in horror, reaching out and grabbing the boy’s wrist as he pulled across himself, opening a sizable slash in his side. The claw retracted as Logan pulled that hand away, but even at the same time the boy’s other hand moved, putting his fingers into the wound as blood flowed from it. Logan’s horror turned to shock and disgust, and then confusion as the boy pulled something out of himself. A blood-smeared plastic baggy and... a phone. “… What?” Logan whispered.

The boy pried open the baggy with his bloody hand and then pulled out the phone with his relatively clean one while the fissure in his side knit itself back together. “… The baggy was Gabby’s idea,” he murmured, bracing the phone against his thigh to push a slider along the side. The power switch. A genuine switch, and not just a button. So the phone could be fully powered down. It wasn’t a commercial phone, it had been designed specifically so the holder could go truly radio-silent if they needed to. Clever, clever boy. He must get it from Itsu because he sure as hell hadn’t gotten it from him.

“... I don’t know who Gabby is,” Logan said, watching as the boy poked at his phone.

“You’ll like her. Everybody does. It’s mandatory,” the boy replied distractedly, eyes flicking over the screen. “… They’ve blocked cell and satellite signals.”

Logan’s heart sank. “So ya cut yourself for nothin’...”

“No.” The boy shook his head. “Forge made this,” he said, and then pressed the screen a few times and slipped the phone back into the baggy, laying it against his thigh to press the air out and close it.

“What did you-- damn it!” Logan exclaimed as the boy opened himself up again and pushed the phone back inside.

“Activated a distress beacon.”

“Why did you put it back in?!?” Logan demanded.

“In case they get through the door,” the boy explained as he glanced toward the makeshift barricade. The sounds of men bickering on the far side and hitting at the door could be heard now. They’d rig up some kind of battering ram soon. “I want it to take as long as possible for them to notice the beacon.”

Logan nodded slowly.
“The data Doug was able to salvage from their computers has given us a name and... It’s given us a
name, but we don’t have any clues to Soteira’s location yet,” Kitty told the assembled X-Men
grimly. She didn’t show any of the images on the screen behind her. Laura knew what the images
contained, she’d seen them, been shown so that she might help. But their best tactical and
analytical X-Men had scoured them for any insights that could be gleaned, and the rest of them
didn’t need to see. Gabby didn’t need to see. “We still don’t have much to go on or much to report.
We know the name now and we know...” she closed her eyes. “... If this is Logan, he’s been
brainwashed or he’s being controlled. If it’s a clone, it’s been programmed.”

“’It’, ” Gabby hissed, face going dark as she shot a glare at Kitty.

“Shhh,” Laura hushed as Jubilee cossetted Gabby’s hair.

“Either way, do not approach alone,” Kitty continued, oblivious to her faux pas and the reaction it
had inspired in the youngest member of her audience. “Call it in. Period. Do not approach. Even if
it means letting him or them get away, do not approach... You will die.”

“Kitty?” Forge cut in, standing up suddenly and turning around, looking up from the tablet he was
holding to scan the others assembled in the terraced seats above him, eyes landing on Laura.

“What is it?” Kitty asked, turning to him.

“Laura’s distress beacon just went live in Siberia,” Forge said, his eyebrows frowning as he
continued to eye Laura.

Laura and Gabby both drew a sharp breath and Laura’s blood ran cold. He hadn’t checked in for
over two days.

Kitty turned her attention to Laura. “Who has your distress beacon?” she demanded.

“... Daken has been keeping eyes on Sabertooth and Deathstrike,” Laura said, voice sounding
hollow to her own ears.

“We have to go! We have to go now!” Gabby exclaimed.

“You gave it to Daken?” Kitty gave her an incredulous grimace.

“He was following Sabertooth and Deathstrike!” Laura retorted. “They know, they found out, and
they approached Daken because they are apparently a great deal stupider than I thought. He
contacted me and I asked him to follow them,” she explained defensively. “I gave him the beacon
because even he could not handle the two of them if he was made.”

“He’s in trouble!” Gabby shrieked, her breath getting ragged with oncoming hysteria. “He hasn’t
called us in two days! He’s in trouble! We have to go! If you won’t help, then fuck all of you!”

The assembly was startled and Laura was fairly certain that was the first time Gabby had ever used
the word. “Gabby, you’re staying here,” Laura said firmly.

“No I’m not!” Gabby shouted back, and she was starting to tear up.

“Gabby, if you stay here, I will leave a skeleton-crew with you to defend the school and take every
other X-Man here with us to rescue your brother,” Kitty cut in before Laura could get into this
argument.
Gabby looked at her, brow pinching, clearly torn, and then nodded.

“Rachel, tell the Cuckoos to get into Cerebra. They need to stay in contact with us and if they loose us they need to call Carol Danvers and tell her where we were going,” Kitty said, turning to Rachel, who nodded grimly. “Siberia. Why is he in Siberia? Fucking Siberia?”

“Hey,” Illyana snapped, shooting her a look.

“Oh you know what I meant!” Kitty snapped and then cast her eyes back toward the assembly. “Everybody form up around Magik! We’re leaving and we have no idea what we’re teleporting into so stay tight and be ready to defend!”

Laura turned and caught Gabby’s shoulders. “Stay with Jubilee and stay alert. If this is a misdirect, you’ll have to defend the school,” she said soberly.

Gabby nodded, wearing a brave face with tears on her cheeks.

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“It’s all in pieces,” Logan said softly, cradling the boy and stroking a hand rhythmically down his back. He’d lapsed back into being a rag-doll after finishing his task and hadn’t said a word since the skin had smoothed back over his guts, secretly burying the beacon inside of him. “Little bits of clarity, strung up like Christmas lights,” Logan kept talking, eyes glued to the door. It wouldn’t be long before they got in. And he’d have to put the boy down again, to try and keep them off of him as long as possible. Which wouldn’t be very long. “I- I can’t remember your name... I remember your mother’s... What’s your name?”

There was no response. He hadn’t really expected one. “Sure hope somebody’s listenin’ at the other end of your thing,” he whispered and swallowed hard. “It’ll be okay. We’ll figure it out. You’re a smart-cookie, right? I remember that. You put your old man to shame.” He bit his lip for a moment, his stomach turning. “Yeah, you make me pretty ashamed of myself alright... No, that ain’t right... I make myself ashamed of myself... Can never seem to do right by you.”

The volume of the voices suddenly hiked itself up a notch outside and Logan frowned. He stopped talking to the boy and focused on the sounds in the hall. Shouting. Machinegun fire. A lot of clamor. Logan chewed on his lip, watching the door intently, listening and waiting. The scuffle went on for what felt like hours but was probably minutes. Then there was a crunching sound at the door and Logan drew a sharp breath as a moment later the door and its frame were both ripped outward and away. And Piotr was there.

“Tovarishch!” he exclaimed, eyebrows going up as he broke into a grin.

“What- wait! Piotr, no!” Kitty’s voice shouted from behind him even as he was shoving the barricade out of the way. She came running through both and stopped just in front of the pile, staring at Logan with wide, scared eyes. She had every reason to.

“... Hey, sprat,” Logan said quietly, his heart lighter and heavier at the same time.

“You- you recognize me?” Kitty asked, voice scared and hopeful. There was a murmur in the hallway, lots of people talking from the sounds of it, passing word down the line.

Logan swallowed and wet his lip, looking down at the rag-doll he was cradling. “... The boy shook somethin’ loose,” he said softly. “... Did ya think it was normal? Them tryin’ ta bust down the door of their own lab?”
“... You’re okay?” Kitty whispered.

Logan shook his head. “Not even close,” he said, and then pursed his lips for a moment before looking back up at her. “Somethin’s wrong with the boy.”

Kitty looked down at the boy for a moment and then turned around, looking at Piotr. “Get Laura in here,” she ordered.

Laura. Logan’s heart swelled at the name. His little girl. She was here. A moment later she was rushing into the room, the visible half of her face etched with worry. She froze, staring at Logan for a few seconds, before her eyes dropped to the boy and her mouth opened slightly. She was moving again, dropping to her knees in front of them. “What happened? What’s wrong with him?” she demanded.

“They musta done somethin’ to him. He’s goin’ in and out of... of this,” Logan said, a lump in his throat. “I- I don’t know his name. I can’t remember. It’s... It’s all in pieces.”

“Daken. He calls himself Daken,” Laura said, and her voice saying his name must have stirred something because the boy started coming alive again.

“Laura?” he asked in a fragile little whisper.

“I’m here, Daken. What did they do to you?” she asked, pulling her hood back to show him her face.

He turned his head and looked at her, his eyes awake and focusing but he still looked lost. “... I...”

“... They did somethin’ to my head,” Logan said softly.

“I know. We don’t blame--”

“No. No, that’s not what I’m talkin’ about,” Logan shook his head firmly. He didn’t want to hear that. He didn’t want people making his excuses for him. “I’m sayin’ if they tried to do the same to him, they might’ve set off one of the psychic mines that’re in him.” Why could he remember that but he hadn’t remembered his son’s name? Why could he remember everybody else’s? “Coulda put him in this state.”

Laura nodded slowly. “... He’s been struggling with depression,” she said very quietly. “It could be a combination of factors.”


“We’re getting both of you out of here,” Laura said, climbing to her feet.

“I don’t deserve--”

“Oh shut up!” Laura snapped hotly, glaring daggers at him.

Logan shut up.

“Pryde,” Laura called, turning to her. “I think we can fit everybody in here for the teleport.”

“No, you three are going now, there rest of us are staying a few minutes to tear this place to the ground,” Kitty corrected firmly and walked out through the wall and then back in a moment later with Illyana in hand. “Take them straight to the infirmary. I doubt there’s anything Cecilia can do for Daken, but I don’t want him under foot here.”
Illyana nodded and walked over, stopping in front of them. “Okay all present stabbykin, keep your hands and arms inside, next stop: home.”

Chapter End Notes

I'd been planning on not even dealing with Logan in this fic and glossing around it until Hunt was over, but I'm impatient and also I got this idea after the conclusion of Claws, so I just went for it. I can't think of much else to say here. Thoughts?
They appeared in the school’s infirmary and Illyana called loudly, “Order up!”

Doctor Reyes came hurrying out of her office and then froze, eyes wide. “Logan?”

“Hey, ‘Cilia. Got a free bed?” Logan asked, still crouched on the floor with Daken cradled against him.

“... Sure,” she whispered and waived at the empty hospital beds spaced along the wall.

“Thanks.” Logan staggered to his feet, lifting Daken, whose eyes weren’t focusing anymore.

[We lost contact!] one of the Cuckoos announced into their minds.

“Yeah, we noticed,” Illyana replied out loud. “Did you call Danvers?”

[Yes.]

“Good. I’m heading back out. Let Tiny know her brother and dad are okay,” Illyana said.

[We did.] the Cuckoo answered, but Illyana was already gone.

Laura followed in Logan’s wake as he went over to one of the beds and laid Daken down on it. Then he leaned over, catching Daken’s jaw and studying his face with a worried brow. “You still with us, kid?” Logan called.

“... I haven’t seen him this bad,” Laura said quietly, folding her arms and squeezing them close against herself.

“I’ll get some equipment and look him--” Doctor Reyes started.

“It ain’t his body, ‘Cilia, it’s his mind,” Logan told her, glancing up.

“... Then I suppose we wait for Rachel,” Doctor Reyes said and pursed her lips.

“Guess so... The quack said they were gonna give him shock-therapy,” Logan said, brushing his knuckles gently over Daken’s head. “S’when I started cutting through ‘em.”

Laura watched the gesture closely, eyebrows lifting. “And he’s... been like this?”

“I think I been with him about a half hour,” Logan nodded slowly. “He woke up a little when he scented me, and again after I shut us in that lab... I was tryin’ t’talk him out, tellin’ him we had to run for it. That’s when he pulled out the phone.”

“I’m glad he did.”

“He put it back in him after he turned it on,” Logan said, glancing at her.

“... Well, that was prudent of him, I suppose,” Laura sighed and walked over to the other side of the bed. “We should probably get it out though.”
“Yeah,” Logan agreed.

“Hey!” Doctor Reyes snapped as Laura popped a claw.

“He put a phone in a plastic bag inside of himself,” Laura said, poking a finger at Daken’s side.

Doctor Reyes gave her a glare. “This is my infirmary. You and your healing factors do not have jurisdiction here,” she said. “You put that away and I will go get surgical tools and gloves.”

Laura retracted her claw and nodded. “Okay.”

Doctor Reyes went over to one of the counters and was washing her hands as the door slammed open and Gabby came running into the room, not slowing down at all as she curved and shot toward them. “Daaaken!” she wailed and climbed right up onto the bed and on top of him.

Daken’s eyes fluttered and got a little less glazed. “Gabby...” he mumbled as her arms wrapped around him.

Logan’s mouth dropped open slightly as he stared at Gabby and then looked back up at Laura.

“Alchemax stole my gene sequence,” Laura explained.

“Oh,” Logan replied, turning his eyes back to stare at Gabby some more.

Daken’s arm had moved to curl around her waist and Laura found a relieved smile curving her lips. Just like in Japan; Gabby had a talent for dragging Daken out of his malaise.

“Gabby, please get off the bed. I need to perform surgery,” Doctor Reyes said, coming back over with a metal tray.

“Why do you need to do surgery?” Gabby asked, frowning and sitting up.

“Daken still has the phone in him,” Laura answered.

“You don’t need to do surgery, just cut it out of him!” Gabby protested.

“That’s surgery, Gabby,” Laura said, smirking slightly. “Doctor Reyes likes to do things her way, and this is her infirmary. Just get down for a minute and introduce yourself to Logan.”

Gabby slid off the bed and Daken made a little sound of protest, turning his head to look after her. Laura put a hand on his shoulder to soothe him and stepped a little sideways to give Doctor Reyes access to his abdomen. Gabby turned her attention to Logan, looking as if she’d honestly just noticed him. “I’m Gabby,” she said, staring at him a moment and then holding out her hand.

“Hi, Gabby,” Logan said softly, reaching out and giving her hand a shake. “Daken says everybody likes you.”

Gabby beamed. “He gave me my superhero name!” she said proudly. “I’m Honey Badger! I’m sweet and feisty and only a fool messes with me!”

Logan grinned and chuckled. “Pleased to meet you, Honey Badger,” he said.

Doctor Reyes had been feeling over Daken’s abdomen during the exchange, searching for the phone’s location, and after apparently being satisfied that she’d found it, she withdrew to open a disinfectant wipe. As the smell of isopropyl alcohol filled the air, Daken’s pulse suddenly sped up and he started struggling, pushing himself toward the head of the bed and the other side of it, away
“No. Don’t touch me,” he snapped, eyes focusing on her.

“Daken, it’s okay, Doctor Reyes is a friend,” Laura said gently as Logan moved to keep Daken from squirming himself off the edge of bed.

“Don’ttouchmedon’ttouchmedon’ttouchme!” Daken turned toward Logan and grabbed for him.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. I gotchya,” Logan caught one hand with his own and put the other on Daken’s shoulder, waiting a moment for Daken to get a little less frantic before glancing up at Doctor Reyes. “All due respect, I think it’s gonna be less messy if Laura does it, ‘Cilia.”

Doctor Reyes nodded, looking unhappy, and took a step back. “Will you please at least sterilize the site?”

“The smell is what set him off,” Laura said, glancing at her.

“... I have iodine.”

“That may not be better,” Laura said slowly, unsure. “This makes at least twice in the last six months that he’s been tortured on an operating table.”

Doctor Reyes sighed and shook her head. “Fine. Proceede. I’ll be in my office,” she said and turned around, removing herself to preserve her medical integrity.

“Daken,” Laura said softly, leaning lower and petting his arm. “The doctor’s gone now. I’m going to take the phone out of you, okay?” He didn’t respond, but he’d gone still. Laura scanned him quickly with her eyes and decided that Logan wasn’t supporting him, he was still tensed up. “Lay back down. You need to relax so I can make the cut.”

“Come on now, you’re alright,” Logan coaxed, pressing Daken to lean back into the pillow and then glanced over his shoulder at Gabby. “You got any magic to work here, Darlin’?”

Gabby nodded and hopped back up on the edge of the bed, wrapping one arm around Daken’s neck and leaning into him until he let himself succumb and fall back. “... Daken, you’re being really weird,” she whined at him, curling up against his opposite side, giving Laura room to work while she pillowed her head on his shoulder and Daken’s arm wound around her waist again. “This is way worse than last time. Why is he like this?”

“Soteria tried to do somethin’ to his head.” Logan sank into a chair next to the bed as Laura made the cut, careful not to breach Daken’s colon, and reached inside. “But he’s got some nasty things inside there, traps that’ll hurt him just as much as whoever goes pokin’,” he explained.

Gabby made a wordless whine in the back of her throat, staying planted, and Daken let Laura pull the phone out of him without reaction. “... Will Jean be able to fix him?” Gabby asked, keeping her head on Daken’s shoulder even after Laura was finished, but looking up with her eyes.

“Jean?” Logan asked softly, turning back to Laura as well.

“Yes. I’m sure she can help,” Laura nodded, answering Gabby’s question but not responding to Logan’s confusion. And he didn’t pursue the inquiry; he’d said his mind was scrambled, he might not even have a clear timeline in his memory anyway. Laura went over to the sink, washing her hands and discarding the baggy in the biohazard trash, then wiped the phone down to clean away a few bloody fingerprints before returning to the bedside.
“Where are the X-Men?” Gabby asked, lifting her head a little but staying where she was. “Why didn’t they come back with you?”

“Kitty wanted to level the place,” Logan answered. “Hope they show up soon...”

“They’ll be fine,” Laura said, shaking her head. “Kitty had almost thirty active and reserve X-Men with her.”

Logan raised an eyebrow. “She sure put that together fast.”

“We were already together. You had good timing,” Laura shrugged, pulling one of the other chairs closer and settling down.

They lapsed into awkward silence for a while; normally Gabby wouldn’t stand for that, which went to show just how disturbed she was by the state Daken was in. They didn’t have to wait long though, before Kitty and Nightcrawler appeared in a puff. Nightcrawler’s eyes were wide and shining as he looked at Logan, and his mouth was stretched in a wide grin, but Kitty had what looked like a very tight grip on his arm that seemed to be anchoring him, her brow was deeply furrowed.

She approached slowly, and Nightcrawler hung back, respectful of her lead. “... Logan... do you remember what happened?” she asked.

“Like a nightmare...” Logan whispered, not looking either of them in the eye.

“Were they controlling you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Or maybe they were just lettin’ somethin’ out that was always--”

“This is not the time for your melodrama,” Laura snapped. Logan gave her a startled look as Laura climbed to her feet and braced her hands against the bed, leaning into her glare slightly. “Did you know who you really were? Were you operating and killing at your own discretion? Did you feel that you had a choice? Did you understand what you were doing on an existential level?”

He was silent for a few seconds, staring back at her. “… No.”

Nightcrawler chuckled and Kitty breathed out a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Laura.”

“Did you come ahead?” Laura asked, turning her head to look at Kitty.

“Everybody’s back on campus and they’ll probably be here in a minute, we just took a shortcut down here,” Kitty replied, coming closer and turning her eyes reluctantly from Logan to Daken. “Might be a good idea to have the heartfelt and undoubtedly loud reunions away from the semi-catatonic super villain.”

“He’s not a super villain,” Laura retorted frowning at her as she heard Gabby growl.

“Kätzchen, perhaps recriminations would be better left for a time when the man has the capacity to defend himself,” Kurt murmured.

“I was being flippant,” Kitty said, rolling her eyes. “My point was maybe we should do this upstairs.”

“I’m stayin’ with my boy ‘til he’s out of the woods,” Logan shook his head, finally looking at Kitty just for a moment before turning his eyes back toward Daken. “Doesn’t seem much bothered
by noise right now anyway. Let ‘em come.”

“No,” Doctor Reyes said, having come back out of her office again. “This is not a party hall. Apart from the family, I’m limiting the traffic to three visitors at a time.”

“What about Jean and Rachel?” Laura asked, turning to her.

“Since we’re apparently looking at psychic-trauma here, I’ll consider them nurses for the day,” Doctor Reyes replied.

“Roger that,” Kitty sighed, nodding to her and then glanced back at Logan. “Pleasantries aside, I think we’ve all got a lot of paperwork ahead of us... Carol stayed behind to go over the Soteria site. She’ll keep us CC’d on what her people find, but right now I’m going to call Jennifer and start getting ahead of this.”

“I’ll come with you,” Laura said, pushing away from the bed. “Gabby, don’t let Daken leave. You’re officially authorized to fight as dirty as you have to.”

“You can count on me,” Gabby chirped, giving a lopsided salute, her head still laid on Daken’s shoulder.

“I know I can,” Laura agreed and followed Kitty, who was already at the door. She listened to the sound of Logan and his chair clattering to the floor as Nightcrawler tackled him. After letting the door close on the enthusiastic reunion, Laura heard the elevator opening and X-Men started spilling out into the hall ahead of them. She sifted through the scents for a moment as she walked toward the small crowd.

“Guys!” Kitty called and then gave a sharp whistle. “Cecilia says no more than three visitors in there at a time. Fight out the order amongst yourselves.” She proceeded to walk right through her teammates and volunteers to get to the elevator while Laura slipped between. Once they were alone and the elevator had started ascending, Kitty gave Laura a tired smirk. “Don’t trust me, huh?”

“You care about Logan as much as me,” Laura replied softly and Kitty smiled. There was a semi-comfortable quiet pause before the doors opened to all the X-Men who hadn’t fit in the first descending elevator. “‘Scuse us!” Kitty called, mostly for Laura’s benefit, to make the crowd part and let them through.

Laura’s nose caught his scent a moment before Remy pulled out of the disorderly cluster and touched her shoulder gently. “How’s--” he cut himself off as Laura grabbed his wrist and pulled him into tow. “-- Okay den,” he amended, a slight note of worry staining his voice.

Kitty glanced back, raising an eyebrow, but didn’t say anything as they made their way to her office. Laura listened to Remy shutting the door before she took a steadying breath, pursing her lips for a moment, and looked Kitty in the eye. “My concern, my reason for wanting to come with you, isn’t for Logan,” she said with forced calm. “It’s Daken.”

Kitty’s sigh didn’t sound condescending, like exasperation, just very tired. “... Rachel and Jean will take a look and see what they can do about the psychic-trauma.”

“S’not de answer she’s looking for,” Remy murmured very quietly, dropping himself into one of the chairs facing Kitty’s desk.

“It’s not just psychic-trauma,” Laura corrected and then her eyes glanced down. “Daken’s been having episodes of depression since...” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “I don’t actually know how long.”
“Since he came back,” Remy supplied, pulling out his deck of cards to fidget with. “Or maybe since de noise dat started him dyin’. He ain’t got warm feelings about how it started, but he was in very bad healt’, so prob’ly hard t’tell what’s depression from what’s his organs shutting down.”

Laura nodded, pursing her lips for a moment. “It does seem to happen after major injuries,” she noted and looked back up at Kitty. “After the run-in with Mister Sinister... it was disturbing. For a few days I couldn’t make him leave bed, and when he finally did, he jumped out of a plane.”

“That... is indeed disturbing,” Kitty agreed, even as Remy chuckled inappropriately.

“I used to cut myself,” Laura said.

“Laura...” Kitty scrubbed a hand through her hair in frustration.

“The only difference between Daken and me is that nobody ever helped him,” Laura said, keeping her face hard and pretending that she knew exactly what she was doing.

“That is not the only difference between you,” Kitty retorted.

“He was bigger than me,” Laura said. “Stronger. More intimidating--”

“Meaner,” Remy added.

Laura shot him a glare, but ignored the ‘help’ and continued. “He was erroneously seen as a greater risk because of it.”

“Forget bigger, he’s manipulative as fuck, Laura!” Kitty exclaimed.

Laura stared at her for a few seconds. “Do you know how I got past the metal detectors to assassinate Candidate Johnson?” she asked quietly. “Leg braces and crutches. My handlers also gave me thick glasses and instructed me to behave as though I had a mental deficiency.”

Kitty closed her eyes and sank into her chair, making a frustrated, wordless groan. “... I’m not sure what you want me to do here, Laura,” she said after a while.

“He’s been growing a great deal in the last two years,” Laura said. “I’ve helped him and offered as much support as I’m able, but he needs help that I can’t give him. And he needs-- he needs...” she faltered, not knowing the right word.

“... Sanctuary?” Remy asked, looking up at her.

Laura nodded, pursing her lips a moment. “He’s been wandering around aimlessly,” she said. “He doesn’t know what to do with himself because he doesn’t know what he wants. Because he has never had the space to explore who he is.”

“Just to be clear: are you asking me to extend ‘sanctuary’ to a man who has kidnapped two students and attacked this school twice?”

“Sabertooth was the one who kidnapped Evan, and Evan has said to me that he believes Daken was being manipulated just as much as anyone involved,” Laura pointed out. “And he didn’t attack the school the first time, he made a false bomb-threat.”

“S’more like a teenager trolling in bad taste dan super villain material,” Remy added and then leaned forward in his chair, giving a short sigh. “And about de more recent problems...” He closed his eyes. “Kitty, he had an active deat’seed inside him, you know dat’s gon’ make a body have
some pretty questionable judgment. But here’s de t’ing, he grabbed a kid he t’ought could help him. He had a deat’seed calling to him and he told it ‘no’.”

“He told it ‘no’ by kidnapping a student and attacking the school!” Kitty protested.

“I’m not saying dat declaring war on a hall of learning was an appropriate response, but I’da been pretty pissed off too!” Remy gave a shrug. “He had good reason for being angry, and you know— how a deat’seed blows t’ings out of proportion.”

“And losing a fight is a ‘good reason for being angry’?” Kitty scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Granted, that describes most of Spider-Man’s rogues gallery, but I thought you were trying to make an argument that he isn’t a super villain.”

Laura frowned and glanced at Remy who looked back up at her, chewing on his lip. “... You think he invented it?” she asked.

“Maybe embellished, but he seem pretty insistent,” Remy said slowly. “And he wouldn’ta had much reason to lie to me of all people. If he told me the deat’seed made him do it, I’da been satisfied.”

“What are we talking about right now?” Kitty asked, glancing between them.

“I think maybe we should ask Iceman to continue this conversation with us,” Laura said, looking back at her.

Kitty’s frown deepened. She reached over and picked up the landline on her desk, pressing one of the presets as she brought the handset to her ear. “Celeste, would you please— Phoebe, would you please page Bobby to my office? Thank you.” After setting the phone back in its cradle, she looked at Remy. “So Gambit, obviously you’d have Laura’s back whenever, but you seem a little more involved here. You’ve been talking to Daken lately?”

“When we did de funeral for Sarah,” Remy replied, nodding. “After dat too. I followed him for couple days. We talked some more, ate a few meals together.”

“And you’d trust him around children?” Kitty asked.

“Daken’s got problems wit’ adults, not children,” Remy shrugged and held her eyes. “When Ororo brought me here de firs’ time, I was a scoundrel jus’ doing my trade and surviving. And not even sure what I was surviving for. De X-Men only took a risk on me because dey didn’t know I’d been Sinister’s not a year earlier... Daken put all his cards on de table. He never pretended t’be anyt’ing but a killer wit’ us. Makes him more honest dan me.”

“And you think he needs help too,” Kitty said.

“Shit, dat man is a hot mess,” Remy nodded, pushing a hand back over his hair.

“Great...” Kitty groaned, then glanced up as there was a knock on the door, and called, “Come in!”

It opened and Bobby, but not the version Laura knew best, stepped in. “Yeah?”

“Bobby, why did Daken attack the school?” Kitty asked.

He stared at her for a moment and then glanced at Laura and Remy, the stink of guilt overtaking him. “... Because I beat the ever-loving shit out of him...” he said in a small voice.
“He says you cut him in half,” Laura said flatly.

“Not- Not completely in half,” Bobby protested weakly. “Just... mostly...”

Kitty stared at him silently for a few tense seconds. “You left out that detail,” she said in a cool tone.

“I told you I beat him up.”

“You didn’t say you cut him in half,” Kitty snapped, glaring at him. “... Bobby, when was your last appointment with your counselor?”

“She was in Mount Kisco... I- I’ve been looking for somebody in Manhattan...” Bobby said, looking away.

“You’ve been ‘looking’ for seven months?” Kitty demanded.

“I-”

“Bobby, you have one week, starting now, to either make an appointment with a counselor or pack your things and get out,” Kitty said.

Bobby stared at her silently for a minute, emotions warring across his face and through his scent, then he nodded and whispered, “Okay.”

“Rachel will see what she can do about the psychic shock Daken is in from whatever Soteria did to him,” Kitty said with grim calm. “Once he’s lucid, I’m going to be talking to him, and depending on how that talk goes, I may be offering him sanctuary. The X-Men have mishandled his situation from the start, and the Roosevelt Island incident makes it pretty clear that there’s a little more to him than we gave him credit for.”

“Okay,” Bobby nodded again.

“You are not going to pick a fight with him. You are not going to even mention Judah,” Kitty said. “And if he brings it up--”

“It was my fault,” Bobby said, voice hollow and soft. “I know that. I knew that... about two seconds after it happened.”

Kitty close her eyes and her head tilted down slightly for a moment as she bit her lip. Finally she looked back up, her face carved in stone. “All of you out now. I need to call our lawyer.” she gave a two-handed shooing wave at them.

“Thank you, Kitty,” Laura said with a nod before turning to follow Bobby and Remy out of the room.

After she pulled the door closed, there was a moment of awkward silence and then Bobby broke it in a quiet, hoarse voice. “... So obviously you’ll have lost all respect for me now.”

“Bobby,” Remy said gently, throwing an arm around his shoulders and pulling Bobby against him. “I know from experience dat Daken come off scary as hell when he’s trying. Cranks up de sexy-dangerous pheromones to fluster you, and it make your skin crawl and your heart flutter at de same time. I feel like a Bond-girl in impractical lingerie is holding a gun to my head.”

Bobby raise an eyebrow. “He’s done that to you?”
“Does it to everybody, I t’ink,” Remy gave a half shrug. “First time he’s fighting somebody and he
doesn’t have deir number yet, he wants to knock ’em off deir game.”

Bobby sighed and shook his head. “I guess I didn’t give him quite the reaction he was looking for.”

“Or you just hit harder dan he t’ought you would,” Remy shrugged. “Bobby, I ain’t giving you an
excuse. I’m just saying dat I understand what happened, and instead of fretting de past, I want you
to t’ink about how you move forward and do better.”

“... Okay,” Bobby whispered, and Remy patted him against the shoulder before letting him go.

“I’m concerned,” Laura said quietly when she could feel Bobby’s eyes on her. “I wouldn’t have
thought that cruelty was in your nature... But I assume that it was an isolated incident.”

“... I’m sorry.”

Laura glanced up at him. “You don’t owe any apologies to me,” she said, and turned to make her
way back downstairs.

Chapter End Notes

Oh God, I hate trying to decide on Gambit’s affectations... I make up rules for where
letters get dropped, but in the end I have to say every combination out loud to decide
on where he slurs and doubles up. I think Claremont pretty much stuck to a fixed rule-
set on him, but since then every new writer does his dialect a little differently. I don’t
want too many outright errors in his dialogue, because he’s an intelligent guy who has
spent plenty of years living in a full-English culture; I think the only uncommon errors
I tend to write in for him are occasional inconsistent tense within a sentence. Mostly
it’s deciding where he’s slurry and where he’s crisp. But dear sweet biscuits it’s hard.

So Laura is managing family affairs now because this family really needs at least one
responsible adult. And after having come into her own, and after having had enough
time to get in a good long think about it, she has decided that she has had quite enough
of Logan's drama-queening and isn't going to stand for it anymore. Logan is starting to
realize that this is not the awkward, unsure teenaged girl he left behind.
[Rachel, come inside. I need your help.] Jean called.

[Coming.] Rachel pushed away from where she’d leaned herself against the wall and called out loud, “Sorry, folks. I’m not cutting the line, but I just got called in there to help with something. Presumably something psychic.” The other X-Men moved to let her through as she walked to the infirmary door and let herself in. Inside, her mother, Storm and Kurt were standing around Logan. There were enough wet cheeks to go around, and Gabby was laying against her brother’s side on one of the beds.

Jean looked up at her and smiled through her tears. “Daken is in severe psychic-shock,” she said, her voice a little pinched by emotion. “I need your help.”

“... Yeah,” Rachel nodded, ignoring a rebellious tug in her mind. Her mother wanted to save this man who had attacked them with fake Purifiers of all things. Because he was Logan’s son. Logan had a little black-lamb, and he was a shit. But he looked after his sisters. Laura asked for help so rarely and deserved every rare morsel she asked for. And Jean wanted to do this. So they were doing it.

Rachel walked to the left of Daken’s bed and positioned herself next to his head. “How did you want to do this?” she asked.

“He’s been mined with psy-traps,” Jean said, stroking Logan’s shoulder once more and then walking to the opposite side of Daken’s head. “They’re not just defensive, or not defensive of him at least. Someone took out a scorched-earth insurance policy on Daken’s mind.”

“Pretty nasty. And I’m guessing somebody stepped on one,” Rachel said, putting one hand against his forehead and one under his ear.

“Seems like a safe bet,” Jean agreed, mirroring Rachel and covering the hand on Daken’s forehead with her own. “We’ll need to brush him out gently. And very, very carefully. We don’t want to be caught by one of the mines.”

“Uuhh,” Rachel nodded and refocused her attention on Daken, sinking into him.

Pain. A pretty girl, full of potential that would never be realized. Running, there was nowhere to run to, but the act felt good. Why was he never worthy? Pain. The touch of a stranger was warmth, the only warmth. Pain. The feeling of blood on his hands, between his fingers, too messy, too messy, he’d be punished, it was supposed to be clean and he’d gotten it wrong, too messy. He could only hear crows, the other birds had flown south. God damn fucking Gibney, he was going to
tare out his kidney and feed it to him one of these days! Pain. Why don’t you want me? Why don’t you want me? Why don’t you want me?

Less than human, born something less, more like an animal, not even an animal, a thing. Why were they touching him? Pain. Tearing away a strip of him at a time. A strip of his flesh. A strip of her mind. Shadow King. His fingers tearing through her. Taking her apart. Taking away everything she was. Making her something grotesque. Making her his. His slave. His toy. Raping her over and over and over. Giving her to Ahab when he got tired of her, and finding a new child to rape over and over and over.

[Rachel!]

Ahab yanking on he leash, choking her, kicking her, sending her to hunt, to catch, to bite into the flesh of her people, her own flesh.

[Rachel!]

She sank her teeth into his neck, her mind into his mind, biting and tearing at him, draining the blood and life and soul from him. Him? Who? Franklin!

[RACHEL!]

A loud scream dissolved into wracking sobs. Rachel was shaking violently. She was half of the floor, half in her Jean’s lap. Her mother’s arms were around her, rocking her. She couldn’t stop crying, sobbing hysterically. Her vision was blurred with tears but she could feel people around her.

“It’s okay. It’s okay, Rachel. You’re safe. You’re safe,” Jean was whispering to her, stroking her hair and holding her close.

“M-Mama?” Rachel choked out and then dissolved back into tears.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. It’s okay now,” Jean reassured her softly, kissing her temple and continuing to rock.

“What happened?” Logan’s voice asked close by. “One of the mines?”

“No. This was something else,” Jean said. “We’re going to need to take a break. I’ll try again later, Logan. Maybe Betsy can help me.”

“N-N-No!” Rachel gasped, pulling herself back, she scrubbed her wrist across her eyes to brush the tears away and twisted around, finding her legs, struggling to get them underneath her. Apart from Logan, there was also Gabby, Cecilia, Piotr, Hisako and Domino crouched and standing around her, worried. She ignored them, pushing herself to her feet, and turned, finding the bed, finding Daken. “I’m not going to abandon him!” Rachel said, her voice feeling raw in her throat as she staggered over and climbed up onto the bed, planting her knees and elbows on either side of him, catching his jaw in her hands and leaning their foreheads together.

She made herself small and narrow and quick like a bullet, barreling her way through the thick walls of brier thorns that surrounded Daken. She didn’t want to see what poison was on the tips of those thorns. She didn’t have the right or permission to see. She could distantly hear Jean calling to her, worried. Rachel knew she was being reckless, knew she was going too fast, too forceful, but she was small, so small, she could slip through the cracks. And then she was inside with the hurt and the doubt and the fear and the confusion. Rachel slowed down, reached out and called, [Come here. Come here. I know. I understand.] She felt a recoil, paranoia, mistrust, trepidation. [I
understand. Come here. I can help a little bit.]

Hesitantly, falteringly, he reached back. He was afraid of her, but he was longing and lonely. He didn’t want to be alone. He didn’t want to be trapped and torn and crouched alone in the corner of his mind. [It’s okay. I don’t want to hurt you,] Rachel soothed, wrapping around him, enfolding and squeezing him and just holding for a moment before she started gently brushing at the tangles, combing his psyche smooth so it could heal itself. He curled himself warmly in her lap, languid, luxuriating in the attention. He’d been touched by rough hands too much in his life, Rachel could tell that much without delving into his specific memories. For so many, that might breed and aversion to being touched at all, but Daken’s psyche was colored with a desperate longing for gentler hands. [It’ll be okay now. Things will be different.]

She kept brushing away the tangles and the dirt and she felt Daken’s psyche knitting itself back into order. Too much order. Daken started going cool in her arms, shutting her out, shutting himself in, boxing up pieces of himself and storing them deep and away. A systematic, rational mind made of boxes and cubbies. That wasn’t unfamiliar, her father was a categorizer too, but he’d done it to keep things where he could find them, Daken was shutting tight lids on everything and hiding things from himself. Healing his psychic-trauma wasn’t going to heal the psychological-trauma. But the psychic-trauma was healing, he was putting himself back together now, Rachel had done all the brushing she could, and her mother’s voice was calling in the distance.

She followed the call, and every inch closer she felt weariness settle deeper into her. Finally she opened her eyes, exhausted, and found herself looking back into silver-blue. “... I cleaned the wound. Your mind will heal now, but take it easy for a few days,” she whispered. She could feel Jean’s hand on her shoulder blade. She tried to push herself back and wobbled, her arms felt weak. Hands caught around her ribs, steadying her, then she felt telekinesis her upward a little and float her to the side.

Her feet touched the floor and Jean’s arm was around her. “Steady. You were under quite a while there,” she said gently.

“Had to... had...” Rachel mumbled, swooning a little.

“It’s okay, Rachel, you did very well,” Jean assured her.

Daken was sitting up on the bed, watching her and then looking around at the other occupants of the room. She could feel anxiety taking hold in him and rising.

“Daken,” Logan called, his voice uncharacteristically small and hesitant. “How do you feel, boy?”

“Don’t call me ‘boy,’” Daken said immediately, though his tone was distracted.

Gabby climbed up onto the bed again and sat down next to him. “You got all messed up while you were chasing the bad-guys,” she complained.

“... I died,” Daken said softly.

“Well then I’m mad at you. I told you not to do that anymore,” Gabby said with a deep frown of disapproval.

“Sorry,” Daken whispered, putting an arm around her as his eyes nervously scanned the room. “... I’m at the school?”

“Yeah, the X-Men rescued you from mad scientists,” Gabby explained, nodding, then she started pointing. “That’s Jubilee, she’s awesome. That’s Hank, he’s the smartest X-Man. That’s Rogue,
she’s the boss of the Avengers now, but she’s still an X-Woman too. And that’s Rachel and Jean, they’re both super-psycho.

“Mhm,” Daken acknowledged and looked at Rachel again, then his eyes flicked to Jean standing beside her. “... Daddy’s redhead.”

Jean made a tiny, strangled sound and then a second later started laughing. “Her name is Jean,” Gabby reiterated as most of the rest of the room started chuckling and snickering.

“Well anyway,” Jubilee segued, still grinning. She grabbed Logan around the shoulders and gave him a tight squeeze. “I’m just not even going to make up something! Me and all the other rubber-neckers are clearing out now. Gabby, Laura says you guys are staying with me tonight. Come on, let’s go grab her and meet my babysitter for dinner.”

Gabby frowned again, brow creasing in debate. “Laura told me to--”

“It’s okay, Darlin’, you go on,” Logan said, patting her shoulder.

“I’ll take responsibility if she’s mad, Gabby,” Jean said gently, giving her a beckoning wave as she walked toward the door, pulling Rachel with her. Gabby still looked unhappy, but she slid off the bed and followed everybody out. “I wonder if Daken even realized he was saying ‘Daddy’...” Jean murmured softly, and then turned to Rachel and gave her a smile with an overcast shadow of worry. “How about you get ready for bed and I’ll go get you some dinner and meet you in your room?”

Rachel shook her head. “I have to talk to Kitty...” she said softly.

“I’ll come with you,” Jean decided.

“I’m okay.”

“You’re staggering like a drunk sailor,” Jean corrected.

“I just-- I need to talk to Kitty,” Rachel said and heard a whine in her own voice.

“Okay. That’s okay. We’re going there now,” Jean assured her as they got into the elevator.

Rachel’s eyelids felt heavy and her feet were like lead by the time she pushed her way through Kitty’s door without knocking. “Kitty,” she called, glancing briefly at Jennifer, who had a chair pulled close up to the back of Kitty’s desk where she’d set her tabtop. “Kitty, don’t give him to SHIELD or whoever is SHIELD now!”

“Rachel are- are you okay?” Kitty asked, giving her a worried look.

“She worked a little too hard,” Jean said.

“Kitty, he’s a hound!” Rachel exclaimed, trying to make her understand but knowing she couldn’t. Kitty gave her a startled look. “Rachel, he’s a hound! Don’t let them take him!”

“Rachel, Rachel, calm down,” Kitty hushed, coming around her desk and stopping in front of her, putting her hands gently on Rachel’s shoulders, the weight of them comforting. “It’s okay. Jen and I were just talking about how to set up a sanctuary or asylum or something arrangement. We’re not
going to let him go without a fight... and if we can’t win that fight, I think we can at least run enough interference to give him a head-start before the acronyms get here. Okay?”

“Really?” Rachel asked, feeling fifty pounds lighter.

“We’ll figure it out. I promise,” Kitty said, stepping in and hugging her. “Is he awake now? I want to talk to him about it if he’s going to understand.”

“He’s awake,” Rachel agreed, nodding. “His psyche’s still healing, so I don’t know how well he’s going to understand. He might. Psyche’s are unpredictable.”

“Okay. Thanks,” Kitty said softly, touching her forehead against Rachel’s for a moment. “You go get some rest now, okay?”

“Okay,” Rachel nodded again, sniffing.

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“How’s your head?” Logan asked softly, watching his son closely, testing for variations in his scent.

Daken turned and looked at him silently for a minute, eyes combing over his face carefully. “... Are you real?” he asked.

“I think so,” Logan nodded.

Daken lifted a hand and reached out; for a moment Logan thought he was going to touch his face. And then he did. The slap was so forceful that Logan staggered and almost went down to his knees. It left him gasping in shock for a few seconds, ears ringing. He blinked and finally looked back at Daken. “... You left me again,” Daken said.

“It felt like somebody squeezed everything inside his chest. “... I’m sorry,” Logan whispered. “I’m so sorry...”

“Why?”

Logan faltered, trying to decide which part the inquiry was referring to. “... A man named Abraham Cornelius, evil son of a bitch, was makin’ human weapons. Usin’ me, usin’ parts of me-...”

“I know,” Daken said, his expression was still far too blank. “He came after us too. Laura and me.”

Logan felt like he’d just inhaled ice water. “B-But, no, I killed him...”

“Before you killed him,” Daken corrected. “And he was part of something bigger. A weapons mega-lab with multiple facilities around the world... They took pieces of us. Violated us.”

“... It’s my fault,” Logan breathed, looking down.

“Probably,” Daken nodded slowly. “People always use Laura and Gabby and me, because you whored yourself to every paramilitary cult you could find for decades, and now everybody wants a piece of that action.”

“I’m sorry.” Logan bit his lip, feeling sick with shame.

“No, you’re pathetic,” Daken corrected with a sigh and let himself drop back into the pillow. “...
'Sorry’ counts for nothing when you’ve made the same mistakes, when you’re going to keep making the same mistakes, over and over without end.”

Logan felt sick and small, but the feeling was punctuated by a little glimmer of something warmer. “You don’t though, do you?” he asked softly, looking up. “You and Laura, you’ve been lookin’ out for each other, haven’t you? Me gone, you’ve been makin’ a life for yourself and- and gettin’ better. Bein’ better.”

Daken turned his head slightly, looking at him. “I saw her-- a month after you were gone, some of those ‘human weapons’ Cornelius was making formed themselves into a little gang and caught us, a few others too. They brought her into the room, threw her in the cage with the rest of us. I smelled her and...” He closed his eyes. “I’d never needed anyone as much as her right then... She keeps saving me, keeps standing by me.”

“She’s a hell of a girl,” Logan said, smiling wistfully. “I wish I could even take credit for that.”

“... She has your dogged determination,” Daken murmured. “Debbie says she has Sarah’s practical good sense... I was never scolded by someone smaller than me before...” He let out a soft, slightly shaky chuckle. “Doctor Kinney must have been an intimidating woman.”

“Debbie’? That’s- That’s the aunt? Laura introduced you to her family?” Logan asked, marveling. Daken must have come a lot farther than he realized.

“They’re my family,” Daken said, looking up at him, brow pinched slightly. “Megan said so.”

“O’course,” Logan nodded, smiling, heart aching.

Daken stared at him silently for a little while. “Who are they?” he finally asked. “Those science-perverts?”

“I don’t know,” Logan shook his head. “Didn’t ask questions... Reason they set off one of your head-traps today, s’because they were tryin’ to brainwash you like they did me... I never asked any questions. I- I should’ve-- I should’ve--”

“I’ve been brainwashed like that,” Daken said quietly and Logan turned his gaze to look him in the eye again. “I asked questions sometimes, but I never doubted the answers. Not even for a moment. I knew well enough that I should, but I didn’t.”

Logan pressed his lips tight, holding back emotions for a moment, swallowing. “... I never did anything for you,” he whispered. “And worse, I used you. Used you for my own ends. Just like him.”

“No,” Daken said sharply, eyes hardening.

“I-”

“No,” he repeated, sitting up. “Not like him. You don’t even come close.”

“... I held you under until you were gone,” Logan breathed, staring back at him.

“You don’t know what he did to me,” Daken replied.

Logan felt like his stomach had turned to lead. “... Tell me.”

Emotions flickered across Daken’s face, his scent fluctuated. Logan thought he wouldn’t, but then
Daken started speaking in a quick, pinched voice. “After every ‘lesson’ he beat me until my body gave out and I lost consciousness. And he made sure to keep me conscious as long as possible,” he said, eyes wide and nervous, challenging, daring Logan to not believe him. “… He left me on the doorstep of caretakers he’d chosen, after he took me from Mother, and then he came back for me when I’d realized my powers. But I was only ten. I was too small for boot camp, too small for many of the lessons he’d planned.”

Daken pursed his lips for a moment and closed his eyes, letting his chin drop slightly. “He hadn’t planned on the pheromones though. And my size didn’t matter for training that asset. So after instilling a sense of loyalty in me, after teaching me what happened if I wasn’t obedient, after teaching me what happened if I so much as hesitated, he sold me to a brothel. He left me there for almost a year, with instructions to practice and learn to use my pheromone powers, and no others, before he returned, or there would be consequences.” He swallowed and was still, with his lips pursed, for a few seconds before adding, “When he returned for me, I was ordered to kill everyone in the brothel. And I did. I knew what would happen if I said ‘no’.”

Logan was on his feet. He put his arms around Daken. It was a stupid thing to do, but he’d had his son in his arms so much of today, when he was still a rag-doll. Daken’s shoulder’s stiffened and drew in and he bit down on his lip so hard a faint tang of blood filled the air. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” Logan choked, tears stinging his eyes. “My boy, I’m--”

“Don’t call me ‘boy’!” Daken snapped, shoving him away abruptly. There was stress in his voice and scent. He wasn’t just saying it to be contrary.

Logan stared at him for a moment. Of course, with Daken back in his right mind more or less, Logan couldn’t take liberties of pretending to be fatherly. They both knew better. He wet his lip, stomach twisting. “I- I know you’re a grown man. I wasn’t meanin’ to conde--”

“He called me that!” Daken cut him off, not looking at Logan, glaring down at his own knees.

Like a puzzle piece snapping into place, and suddenly Logan could see the picture. Oh. Of course he had. Logan swallowed slowly and took a deep breath. “… Hideyoshi.”

Daken frowned softly for a few seconds and then turned to look at him, confusion written in his eyes.

“You mother wanted to name you after her grandfather,” Logan said softly, watching Daken’s eyes widen slightly.

“No,” Daken said. “No. That’s not who I am.”

“Yosh--”

“I’m not what she wanted!” Daken cut him off, an edge of hysteria suddenly in his voice. “Stop adulterating her legacy!”

“You are her legacy,” Logan told him.

“No no no no no no no…” Daken’s face crumpled and he started shaking.

Logan caught him around the shoulders and pulled Daken against him again, resting a hand gently on his head. “You are so smart and tough as nails and graceful and quick-witted, just like her,” he said softly. “You can talk anyone in circles... Was never an argument she didn’t win, your mother. You got so much of her in you.”
“Stop it. Stop it,” Daken whispered, continuing to tremble. “‘Hideyoshi’ was still-born. That’s how
it needs to be. That’s how I need it to be.”

“... Whatever you need, son. I ain’t got the right to tell you who to be, and I think you’re doin’
better on your own than you ever were with anybody tellin’ ya,” Logan said softly, stroking his
hand over Daken’s hair.
Some people are really good at adulting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After going home to retrieve Jonathan and making her way back to campus, Laura was caught on the way through the foyer by Gabby and Jubilee. “Jubilee said that Daken and Dad need some time alone to talk and maybe cut each other up,” Gabby announced. “And Jean said if you’re mad, it’s her fault, not mine.”

“I’m not mad,” Laura said, putting a hand on top of her head. “Daken’s awake?”

“Yep,” Gabby agreed.

“And they were not cutting each other when we left!” Jubilee added with a grin. “So come on, emergencies have been un-emerged-- submerged?-- Let’s grab a baby and another Jonathan, and go get us some dinner!”

“Jubilee, the point of staying the night is that I don’t want to leave campus,” Laura explained, handing Jonathan’s leash to Gabby.

“Real quick! I know a great place right near by, we can be back in an hour!” Jubilee said brightly.

“I’m serious,” Laura protested, frowning at her.

Jubilee’s grin dropped. “I’m sorry. You’re right. It’s a serious situation, and you’re being serious, and I’m not taking you seriously. I’m sorry,” she said. “Order-in. We’ll Uber-Eats it. It’ll be great.”

“Thank you,” Laura said, nodding.

“Twenty-five with chicken!” Gabby demanded.

“Gabby. New experiences. I was thinking Indian tonight?” Jubilee suggested.

“I like Indian,” Laura nodded.

Gabby made a wary face. “Does it have chicken?”

“India has chickens, Gabby,” Laura said, smirking.

When they arrived at Jubilee’s suite, Shogo was on the floor of the sitting area, playing with a bead-maze, and Starsmore was sitting on the couch with Evan. All three looked up as the door opened. Shogo broke into a huge grin, pushing himself up and toddling toward them while a myriad of emotions flashed across Evan, and Starsmore was unreadable as usual. Evan got to his feet as well, forcing a smile.

“Hi, Laura. How’s your brother?” he asked, a hint of strain in his voice.

“He’s awake,” Laura said a little noncommittally, tilting her head. “I haven’t spoken to him yet. I don’t know the details of what happened to either of them.”

“Well, I mean, he’s in one piece, and he’s safe, and you found Logan, so it’s- it’s not the worst day, right?” Evan said with a slightly helpless shrug.
Laura smiled. “It is a good day,” she agreed. “There was difficulty and pain to get here, but this is a turning point.” She walked across the floor and stopped in front of him, catching his hands and sobering. “Evan, I’ve spoken to Kitty about the possibility of offering him sanctuary. Daken... he’s been making progress on his own, but he’s also been... he’s been turning his violence on himself.”

“That’s... I mean,” Evan mumbled quietly, squirming a little. “I mean, there was already a lot wrong with him. He was already... kind of... borderline-to-actual suicidal... So thats--” He bit his lip for a moment, seeming to debate. “I’m- I don’t want to say that I’m not surprised, but--”

“And sanctuary?” Laura asked, watching him closely, drawing a breath past her teeth and tasting his scent.

Evan wet his lip, eyes fluttering down for a moment and brow pinching. He blinked twice and looked back up, into her eyes. “Well, I think he probably really needs some help,” he said at last.

Laura took a step and wrapped her arms around him. “You’re a good person, Evan,” she whispered.

“Oh good. That’s what I was going for,” he said, hugging her back.

“We’re going to order Indian. Do you want to join us?” Laura asked after a few moments as she pulled back.

“Thanks, sorry, I’ve got plans with Jia,” Evan replied, smiling at her. There was still apprehension lingering on him, but less now.

“Alright. Gabby and I will be here tomorrow if you want to talk any more,” Laura said.

“Thanks. I hope-- I hope it works out,” Evan said, giving her another smile and a nod. “I’ll see you,” he added, before turning and making his way toward the door. As he passed Gabby, he held up a hand, which she high-fived as hard as she could.

After he had left, Jubilee plopped down on the couch next to Starsmore, Shogo already in her arms. “Aw, look at you gettin’ your apocalyptic-big-brotherin’ on!” she said with a huge grin. “So cute.”

“He needed to talk,” Starsmore shrugged. “It’s a bit of a shake-up for him. He’s not angry about it, he knows the man’s been sick, he’s just worried. What with the man being sick and all.”

“He’s in control,” Laura sighed, settling herself in one of the chairs next to the couch. “He makes bad decisions sometimes-- often-- but he knows he’s making them.”

“And his ‘bad decisions’ are the kind that get himself hurt, mostly,” Gabby noted, crouching and poking at the beads on Shogo’s toy.

“Yes,” Laura nodded. “The self-destructive behavior is much of what I’m hoping to address.”

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“You just threw yourself to them?” Logan asked, staring, morbid horror adding itself to the cocktail of guilt, inadequacy and pity twisted in his guts.

“After I put Megan’s phone inside me so Laura could track us,” Daken nodded.

“Daken, there’s gotta be better ways to track those crazy bastards than letting ‘em kill you!” Logan protested.

“Oh, I see, I made a decisions so naturally it was wrong!” Daken snapped, glaring at him.
“If the decision is to get yourself killed then damn right it’s wrong!” Logan retorted.

“It was expedient!”

“Your life is worth more than ten minutes time saved!”

Daken pulled up his knees, put his arms around them and dropped his face into the nest, whining something so quiet Logan couldn’t make out the words.

“Daken, I can’t—”

“Everything I do is wrong!” Daken shouted, still curled on himself.

“Hey, no, no, that ain’t what I’m sayin’,” Logan called in a softer voice, getting out of his chair again and putting a hand on his son’s shoulder. “I’m just... You’re worth more than that. You gotta see that you’re worth more.”

Daken stayed quiet and didn’t uncurl but didn’t shove him away either. The silence was suddenly broken by an angry squawk from the hallway outside. “You little—” Kitty’s voice started and then broke off in a shriek that was silenced a split-second later.

Another female voice was yelling as Logan’s blood ran cold following a scream that had rung of genuine terror. “Kitty,” he whispered, turning from Daken and taking a few steps toward the door before it slammed open, and a boy, a freshman or younger, came running in. He skidded to a stop halfway, staring at Logan and then set his face in a determined glare.

“Don’t screw with me, old dude! I will drop you!” the boy warned.

“Boy, you do not know who I am,” Logan growled, narrowing his eyes. Child or not, if this little bastard had done something to Kitty...

“He knows exactly who you are and he could drop you in two seconds,” Daken said in a calm voice, uncurling and sliding off the bed. “And don’t call him ‘boy’ either.”

“Who the hell is he?” Logan demanded, turning his eyes to his son as Daken stepped right past him. “What did he do to Kitty?”

While Logan was still talking, the boy had taken motion again and ran straight into Daken, wrapping his arms tight around Daken’s chest. Logan was so startled, he forgot Kitty for a moment until he heard Daken murmuring as he stroked a hand through the boy’s hair. “Zach, what did you do to Pryde?”

“I made her go through the floor,” the boy, Zach, mumbled, still clinging for all he was worth.

“This is the basement. There’s nothing below here,” Daken said, frowning.

“There’s dirt and stuff.”

“Can she get out?”

“I d’know. Who cares?” Zach said, pulling away and grabbing Daken’s arm, tugging at him. “Come on! We have to go!”

The door slammed open again and a furious woman stormed into the room, one hand holding up a skirt that was many sizes too big for her while an equally over-sized blouse and blazer hung off her shoulders. It took Logan a few moments to place who she was. “Bring. Her. Back!” Jennifer
Walters snarled, glaring at Zach.

“Bite me!” Zach snapped at her and looked up at Daken again. “You wanna kick her ass or should I?”

“Zach, we have to figure out how to get Pryde back,” Daken told him calmly.

“Why?!” Zach demanded, a look of utter betrayal on his face. “She’s a bitch and I hate her and we have to get out of here!”

“Zach, you need to calm-- HEY!” Daken roared in startled fury as Kurt suddenly appeared and snapped a power-dampener around the boy’s neck before his smoke had cleared. Daken pulled Zach against his side and took an angry swipe at Kurt as the elf hopped back out of range.

“Nonononono!” Zach shrieked clawing at the collar.

At the same moment, Kitty rose up through the floor, her face etched in a snarl. “Detention,” she growled, glaring at Zach. “One. Month.”

“IhateyouIhateyouIhateyou!” he screamed back at her, tears in his eyes as he threw his arms around Daken and clung again.

“Shhhh. Zach, shhhh. Calm down,” Daken whispered, putting an arm around him and stroking the boy’s shoulder soothingly as Zach started sobbing in earnest.

“We hafta-- We hafta gooo!” Zach whined against Daken’s chest.

“Kurt would you get him out of here?” Kitty asked with an angry sigh.

Daken’s arms tightened around the kid and he gave a deep growl, glaring and her for a second before turning the look on Kurt.

“Kitty,” Logan said softly, catching her eyes and shaking his head. Daken was being protective of the boy, like Logan had never seen him, never even imagined he could be. Whoever this obnoxious little brat was, he’d sure charmed the hell out of Daken.

Kitty let out another sigh through her teeth and turned her eyes back to Daken. “Daken, Laura tells me that you had her tracker because you volunteered to follow and report on Sabertooth and Deathstrike.”

“I’ve got nothing to report. They were both still on their feet when I passed out from blood-loss,” Daken shot back in a cool, wary tone. “Now go call whatever acronym is going to try to pick me up, and leave me alone.”

“We’re not calling any acronyms, though I’m sure we’re going to be having plenty of conversations with them over the next few days,” Kitty said, shaking her head and resting her hands on her hips. “Which is what I’ve been working on with Jen the past couple hours. Figuring out how we’re going to tackle what’s been done to Logan, and,” she closed her eyes and scrubbed a hand through her hair. “And the arguments we’ve got if they try to come after you.”

Daken frowned, giving her a suspicious look. “But I won’t be here, will I?” he said softly.

“I want to work out a contract. Jen and I got a basic outline, but I’d like your input on it too,” Kitty said calmly. “Under the Mutant Nation banner, we might be able to get the acronyms who have been sniffing around you to give you a little breathing room. The non-negotiables here are: you
will live on campus, you will abide by house safety regulations, you will go to no less than one weekly therapy session, and you will take no mercenary work even if God Himself tries to commission you.”

“... Well, I’m not very good with floods anyway,” Daken deadpanned. Zach’s sniffling had died down and Logan watched his fingers ball up in the back of Daken’s shirt, gripping white-knuckled.

“So?” Kitty asked, raising an eyebrow.

“... I need to talk to Laura,” Daken said quietly.

“She’s the one who asked me to set this up,” Kitty replied.

Daken was quiet again, biting his lip.

“Daken,” Logan called softly. “The first time-- The first time your head got broken, when Chuck was messin’ around in it, after that, he told me to take you somewhere safe to heal and, maybe it wasn’t in so many words, but I told him to go to hell.” He closed his eyes, taking a shaky breath and feeling heavy and old. “I told him I knew what was best for you. But that was a lie. It wasn’t ever about what was best for you, it was about what I wanted. Revenge. I stole your chance, and then got mad at you for not bein’ a trouper about it.”

“... Is this really the time, Logan?” Daken asked, voice sharpening with irritation.

“Yeah, it is,” Logan said firmly. “You needed a safe place then, and you need one now. It’s what you’ve always needed. And Laura’s tryin’ to do what’s right for you. What I was too selfish to do.”

Daken pursed his lips for a moment, one arm still holding Zach against him, and then nodded. “Let’s see that contract,” he said.

Jennifer shuffled forward, still holding up her clothing awkwardly, and handed a clipped bundle of papers to him. “Make your notes and I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon so you, Kitty and I can go over them together,” she said, and then turned to Kitty. “Now I need a bathroom or something so I can scale back up without stretching a way too expensive suit-set.”

Kitty nodded. “Kurt, could you take her?” she asked and then looked back at Daken and Logan. “Follow me. I asked Storm to get a couple rooms ready. And Zach, go to your dorm.”

“You go to hell,” Zach spat back at her.

Kitty narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re already at a month’s detention, kid, how much more do you want to tack on there?”

He glared at her and kept clinging to Daken. Daken patted his shoulder gently. “Zach, go on. I’ll find you later,” he said softly.

Zach bit his lip, looking up at him with a torn expression, before finally detaching himself and stomping over to the door. Kitty groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Great. Now maybe you can just tell him to obey school rules and pass his classes.”

“What isn’t he passing?” Daken asked, frowning at her.

“Name it. Math, history, science, Spanish--”

“He’s fluent in Spanish,” Daken cut her off.
Kitty stared at him for a moment and then squinted her eyes shut, wrinkled her nose and let out a puff of air through her teeth. “I swear to God. That kid.”

Chapter End Notes

There’s probably more I could do with Daken talking to Zach or Laura later, or legal junk the next day, but I’m tired of this for now, so I think I’m going to shoot back forward for the next chapter, where we left off after 10. I’ve had enough of this angst and I want to get back to the more-different angst.
Daken is offered a teaching position.

Chapter Notes

**Time Stamp:**
Jumping forward again. This one takes place the day after chapter 10.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“He’s bored,” Rachel said with a shrug.

“Bored,” Kitty repeated, giving her an annoyed look.

“We’re talking about somebody who sleeps about five hours a night and is used to being constantly on the move, meticulously researching targets, subverting patsies, planning out fastidious ‘accidents’, and being on a different continent every week,” Rachel explained. “We have him teaching one pseudo-class that requires no real prep work for someone with his level of experience. So yes, he’s bored.”

Kitty groaned, slumping in her chair and letting her head drop against the back of it. “And his solution to boredom is to pick at Bobby? Why is this so much like babysitting?” she whined.

“It’s called regression,” Rachel replied with a sigh. “Or in his case, maybe it’s less of a regressed state and more of a failure to have emotionally advanced beyond the age he was when his abuse started for… God, more than half a century.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “He has grown since Charles disrupted his core conditioning though. Even without having observed him first-hand the last few years, comparing his larger behavior patterns and movements, and what the people who have had sporadic contact with him have told me, I think he’s come a long way psychologically.”

“Yay him. He’s acting like a fifteen-year-old instead of a ten-year-old,” Kitty sighed, wrinkling her nose.

“His maturity level seems to be largely contextual,” Rachel said, drumming her fingers against the desk. “In situations where he’s more comfortable or more experienced, he comes off as fully adult in every way. It’s specific social situations that seem to have him acting on a younger level. He was taught (and I use the word ‘taught’ euphemistically) to self-isolate, and so while he may have learned to manipulate, his ability to socially connect with other people is lacking.”

“He seems to have connected with Zach just fine,” Kitty pointed out.

“And his sisters,” Rachel nodded. “And he’s perfectly relaxed with the students that show up for his morning workouts.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “He’s definitely more comfortable around people he sees as children.”

“Is that creepy? It sounds creepy,” Kitty grimaced.

“I do not like the word ‘creepy’ in this context,” Rachel said darkly, lips twitching downward. “That comes with some implications that are both unsavory and incorrect.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t-- Sorry.”
Rachel sighed. “No matter how long it’s been, part of him still sees ‘grown-ups’ as victimizers. Children don’t put him on edge because his subconscious doesn’t immediately register them as potential threats.”

“Fine, not ‘creepy’ just…” Kitty groaned, rubbing her hands over her face, “…broken and sad… So, this got awkward and uncomfortable, and can we get back to the topic of what to do about a bored ex-assassin? You’re saying we need to keep him busier?”

“If you try to give him meaningless busy-work, you’re just going to insult him. He’s too smart to condescend to,” Rachel pointed out. “And that point in itself deserves closer examination: he is highly intelligent, highly educated, highly articulate, highly experienced and this. is. a. school.”

“You want him to teach.” Kitty grimaced at her.

“The students keep showing up and behaving themselves for his morning workouts and I’ve never heard him make a complaint about it, despite having been peer-pressured into it by a bunch of teenagers,” Rachel said with a little smirk. “We’re going into summer-session, so we need more no-homework outdoor classes for the kids who are stuck here.”

Kitty leaned her elbows on the desk and rested her chin against her knuckles. “…Unarmed combat?”

“It’s a start. And seeing how he does with a imposed schedule can give us a better idea of what to do with him in the fall,” Rachel agreed and then paused, running her tongue along the inside of her teeth as she thought. “And I’d like to see if we could get him interested in some powers-tutoring.”

Kitty frowned slightly. “We haven’t had a new feral since Tevon, and he’s been past the rough patch for a couple years.”

“Not those powers.”

“Oh. Right,” Kitty said, wrinkling her nose and looking a little worried.

“You have trouble remembering the students who behave themselves,” Rachel chuckled.

“Now you’re just making me feel bad,” Kitty complained.

Being called to the principal’s office was an idea Daken knew from cliche but had never been a party to before. Ironic that his first time should be six decades since he’d participated in formalized academia. He supposed that receiving a psicast rather than having one’s name blared over a loudspeaker like in the movies would tend to be less embarrassing for students, but Daken still had a visceral aversion to telepathy, and the reminder that he was now linked in made his skin crawl just a little. He might have ignored such a summons if it hadn’t been Rachel.

He knocked on Pryde’s office door but didn’t bother waiting for a reply before opening it; he’d been called, after all. “Yes?” he asked, stepping halfway into the room and pausing there.

“Come on in,” Pryde said with a beckoning wave. Rachel was sitting on the edge of her desk.

Daken ventured the rest of the way into the room and shut the door. “So... I violated the terms of my stay, yet you have not called down a slew of government agents upon me, I imagine as a matter of either mutant solidarity or a favor to the family. Is this when you tell me you’re going to look the other way while I disappear?”
Pryde sighed. “I’m not kicking you out Daken, sit down. Nobody got hurt and I’m going to call this a learning experience,” she said. “However, I have decided it’s about time you started pulling your weight around here.”

“You’re not putting me on a team,” Daken said firmly, remaining on his feet.

“Yes. You’ve made that insultingly clear.” Pryde rolled her eyes. “We’re going into summer session in two weeks, I wanted to talk to you about running a couple classes.”

Daken raised an eyebrow, legitimately surprised. “You want to make me a teacher?”

“Don’t get too excited. It’s summer session P.E.,” Pryde replied. “Your morning warm-up club has been going well, and we’d already been discussing the possibility of putting credits toward it. From what I hear, you’re a pretty good coach. How do you feel about a beginner and advanced class in unarmed combat?”

Daken wet his lip slowly, considering. “Beginner level will not be combat-oriented. It will be exercises based around building strength, balance and focus. I will not teach combat to any student until they have proven their proficiency in those areas to me,” he said.

Pryde’s eyebrows rose and Rachel was now grinning. “Well alright then,” Pryde said.

“For the first week of term there will only be one class. Before the beginning of the second week I will select which students may advance to the combat class,” he added.

“Oh okay,” Pryde nodded. “And it will be non-lethal combat only, obviously.”

“No.”

Pryde frowned darkly. “Excuse me?”

“This is not an ethics class. This is not a philosophy class,” Daken said in a slow, precise voice. “I will be teaching my students to defend themselves. I will be teaching them to break noses and sternums if they believe their lives are in legitimate danger. I will be teaching them that when they are being attacked, their primary concern is their own well-being.”

Pryde stared at him for a few moments and then looked at Rachel. Rachel gave a shrug. “It’s the same philosophy a typical self-defence teacher would go by,” she noted.

“These aren’t typical kids,” Pryde protested.

“Many of the students at this school have ‘typical’ strength and ‘typical’ reflexes,” Daken pointed out. “I am willing to teach that lethal force is only appropriate when the situation is kill-or-be-killed, but I will not tell a child to value their opponent’s life over their own, and it is a god damned travesty that this institution has been doing exactly that.”

“You are way out of line, Daken,” Pryde warned, glaring at him.

“‘Welcome to the X-Men. Hope you survive the experience.’ Sound familiar?” Daken snapped, glaring right back. “Do you realize the children are repeating that now? Do you realize they believe it? You are raising the next generation of mutants to believe that they are all destined to die early, painful deaths protecting a corrupt infrastructure.” He saw, heard, smelled Pryde falter and kept pressing. “I will teach my students to defend themselves. And whichever one of you brave martyrs let that little catch-phrase slip within earshot of a child ought to be fired.”
There was a moment of shocked silence, and then Pryde turned to look at Rachel again. “... I think it’s worth having a staff meeting on the topic of student morale,” Rachel said quietly.

Pryde groaned softly and rubbed her hands over her face. “Okay. Yes. Breakfast meeting tomorrow, spread the word please,” she said and then shook her head, folded her hands, and looked back at Daken. “I’ll get back to you about the classes. I need to think about this.”

“You need to think about teaching the children that their lives are worth something?” Daken demanded.

“Daken. Simmer, okay.” Rachel admonished softly. “She needs to think about the philosophical message and treading the line carefully to keep the students’ interpretation of it well away from the us-and-them rhetoric that some mutant leaders push.”

Daken scoffed and folded his arms.

“You’ll be attending the staff meeting, of course,” Rachel said. “Seven o’clock sharp.”

“... Alright,” Daken said, slightly surprised.

“And aside from the classes,” Pryde called his attention back. “I wanted you to do some powers-mentoring.”

“Powers-mentoring,” Daken repeated, raising an eyebrow.

“Working one-on-one with a student, helping them on powers control,” Pryde explained. “Bobby was pretty impressed by what you did with Zach on that, and considering his powers aren’t even remotely related to yours, so am I.”

Daken glanced at Rachel, frowning. “Oh, so this is the ‘stay away from Zach’ part of the program then? You think you’re going to get the ball out of my mouth by waving another toy in front of me? Is that it?”

“This is completely unrelated to Zach, and we’re going to stick to the same rules as before for now,” Rachel assured him. “You’re the only one who can get him to behave anyway.”

“Daken, the last time we had a student with pheromone powers-- well, the last time was also the first time. None of the X-Men had any experience trying to teach someone with that powerset, and we didn’t even know any adult mutants she could call for advice,” Pryde explained, stinking of guilt. “She had a really unhealthy perception of her own powers and we really… Dani tried to help her work through it, but we were just flying blind.”

“And where is the little dear now?” Daken asked.

“... She was one of the students killed by Purifiers following M-Day,” Pryde’s eyes turned toward the top of her desk.

“I see,” he said.

“We have a student now--”

“The contact-metamorph.”

“Oh, you, uh, you already know?” Pryde glanced back up at him.

Daken raised an eyebrow at her and tapped his nose.
“Right. Yeah. So, Deeds has pretty good control over his shape-changing abilities now, but he’s barely even aware that the pheromones are a thing,” Pryde explained. “He’s staying on this summer and I want you to work with him.”

“Fine,” Daken nodded.

“And just to be completely clear,” Pryde said, her face going grim as she fixed Daken with a glare, “if you kidnap Zach again, I’m calling the Avengers, Alpha Flight, the C.S.A., and whatever other acronyms are still operating.”

“... Understood.”

Chapter End Notes

I actually wrote this a while ago, but I wanted to finish up the arch with Logan before posting it. And for a while I was thinking "Crap, after mentioning a staff meeting, now I have to write a staff meeting!" but now I'm thinking that this is drabbles without a strict order; I could always write that later when I have an actual idea for it. Or not! The point of labeling this as drabbles was to avoid stressing over stuff like that. So next chapter will not be a staff meeting, maybe that'll never be written at all. Assume that there was a staff meeting and anybody who needed to be embarrassed was suitably embarrassed.
Zach has a birthday.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Zach pushed the slider to turn the alarm off and then picked up his phone, blinking against the bright glare as he unlocked it. He opened his text messages, nothing new had come in. He pulled down the task bar to check for alerts. Some apps wanted to be updated but there were no missed calls or voicemails. He checked his Facebook feed. Nothing he cared about. Zach yawned and put the phone back down, then pushed himself tiredly out of bed and started the task of getting ready for the day. Once he was dressed and his hair fully styled, Zach pulled his door open and started to step into the hall.

“You’re not going to wear those, are you?”

Zach jumped and turned sharply to look up at Daken, who was casually leaning against the wall next to his door. “What?” he asked stupidly.

“The shoes. They’re last year’s colors,” Daken noted in a bored tone, eyeing Zach’s shoes.

Zach looked down at his feet, suddenly self-conscious. “Well, I mean--” he faltered. He was interrupted by shoebox blocking the view of his feet so suddenly he jumped again.

“Happy Birthday,” Daken said, and when Zach looked up again, he was smirking.

Zach puffed in excitement, taking the box and pulling the lid off to gaze upon the brand new pair of Nikes. “Thanks, man!” he exclaimed happily, kicking out of his old shoes and shoving them to the side as he pulled the tissue paper out of the new ones.

After classes ended for the day, Daken had taken Zach to the mall to get him the latest model of phone and various other items that struck his fancy. He kept checking his phone (first the old one, then the new one after it had been activated) every ten minutes or so. It was normal for him to be preoccupied with his devise, but usually he was posting something every ten minutes, not searching through his apps with a pinched brow and then putting it quietly away, smelling of disquiet. Daken made note of the peculiar behavior but didn’t comment on it through the afternoon.

He observed Zach checking his phone again as they settled into a table at a little hole-in-the-wall bento bar, and Daken leaned his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his hands, watching Zach until he slipped the phone back into his pocket and looked up. Zach flushed slightly in embarrassment as he realized he was being stared at and shifted awkwardly. “Are you expecting a message from someone?” Daken asked.

“I mean... It’s my birthday,” Zach faltered, looking deeply uncomfortable.

“Oh is it? I hadn’t realized,” Daken replied.

“I just... I figure Mom’ll probably leave a message on my Facebook or something,” Zach mumbled and bit his lip.

“Ah, yes. That makes sense,” Daken said, feeling a twinge of queasiness which he shoved away.
“Social media makes the birthday thing so much easier.”


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“Bobby!” Kurt called, trotting up the hall as Bobby stepped out of his classroom. When he’d closed the distance, he asked, “You have a prep-period next, yes?”

“Yeah?” Bobby nodded, tilted his head.

“Zach did not come to homeroom. Can you check his dorm and make sure he is not ill?” Kurt asked.

“Probably just skipping, but yeah, sure,” Bobby agreed.

“Thank you.” Kurt squeezed his arm and hurried back to his classroom.

Bobby stood still and considered for a moment and then headed for the staff lounge. If he was going to get in an argument with Zach, he’d need more coffee. And maybe he’d find somebody else to foist the task off on. He reached the lounge and pushed through the door, then threw a little celebration in his head. “Good, you’re here. Perfect,” Bobby said, walking in.

Daken looked up from his book and raised an eyebrow. “... ‘Perfect’?”

“Zach skipped homeroom. Kurt is saying ‘maybe he’s sick’ but I’m pretty sure he’s just skipping. I mean, he does this. Stays up too late playing video games, yadda yadda,” Bobby explained as he went to the counter and started fussing with the Keurig; everything about this conversation felt less awkward if he was doing something.

“Don’t worry, Snowflake. I’m sure you can both be wrong,” Daken said in an unconcerned tone, but he was already pushing out his chair.

“You going to check on him?” Bobby asked, turning to lean against he counter as he watched Daken get to his feet.

“No, I’m just not interested in the company here,” Daken shot back, heading for the door.

“... I’m sorry,” Bobby said, and Daken paused, one hand on the door. “I’m sorry for making fun of your shitty life... You were being kind of an ass-hole, and I snapped.” He looked down and bit his lip for a second. “Look... I’m not a fan of your sense of humor, but I know that what happened to you had to have been bad, and it wasn’t your fault.”

There were a few seconds of silence before Daken replied, “Don’t take everything so seriously. I’m just going to check on Zach.” Then he breezed out the door without so much as glancing at Bobby.

Bobby watched the door swing back shut, biting his lip for a moment, before he viciously kicked the chair closest to him. “Damn it!”

000

“Oooh, I’m not a fan of your sense of humor!” Daken snarled under his breath, stalking through the school, largely quiet now that first period was in session, toward the student dorms. He stopped at the beginning of the hall and stood still for a moment, closing his eyes and doing a quick breathing exercise to center himself. Once he’d found
equilibrium, he made his way to Zach’s door and knocked, then pressed the button next to the reader. “Zach?”

He waited, and a few seconds later he heard the door unbolt. Daken pushed on it and walked inside. It was dark, just the light filtering through the blinds, and Daken relied on his ears and nose while his eyes adjusted, turning and walking over to the bed, where Zach was still under the covers, curled up on his side. He’d been crying last night, but not more recently than that. “... You’re mother never called?” Daken murmured, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“I don’t care,” Zach replied, voice pinched.

“Of course you do,” Daken sighed and shook his head. “You knew she wasn’t a very good mother, but she’s still the only one you have... So you hoped.”

Zach drew a shuddering breath. “I don’t want to hope.”

“I’ve heard it said that hope is supposed to be good for you,” Daken noted softly, gazing blankly into the semi-dark room. “But I imagine that depends on what you’re hoping for.”

“Like something that could ever actually happen,” Zach spat. He made a sound like swallowing a hiccup. “... She never wanted me. Now she’s just got an excuse for not wanting me.”

“She doesn’t deserve you.”

“I just want-- I don’t--” Zach sniffed and rolled onto his back, rubbing his eyes. “I want her to just say she’s cutting me loose. Like- Like if she’s not going to be my mom anymore, I want her to just say so. So that-- So that I don’t have to wonder anymore. So I don’t have to do this anymore.”

Daken reached out and pet Zach’s hair for a minute. Zach closed his eyes and sniffled a bit more. “... Zach, I have to leave for about a day,” he said quietly.

Zach’s eyes snapped back open and he started squirming to sit himself up. “I’ll- I’ll get dressed and--”

“You’re staying here,” Daken cut him off, shaking his head, and trying to ignore the way Zach’s face crumpled and the smell of fresh misery overwhelmed the stale. “Pryde says if I kidnap you one more time, she’s calling the cops on me.”

“She’s stupid,” Zach muttered, scowling.

“I’ll come right back. Don’t worry,” Daken assured him, and Zach nodded miserably. “I’ll tell them you’re not feeling well. Take however long you need, but remember that skipping classes makes keeping up more difficult, so you should try to go when you feel up to it.”

000

After leaving the airport, Daken rented a car. Having gained three hours, it was still early afternoon, and whether or not he’d find his query at home or have to wait nagged at him through the thirty minute drive. There was a car in the driveway when he finally arrived, and Daken pulled up next to it. He checked his teeth in the mirror and straightened his tie before stepping out, attache case in hand, walking to the door and knocking.

After a minute or so, it opened and a woman who looked to be not quite or barely thirty frowned suspiciously up at him. “What?” she asked.
“Would you be Ms. Marcia Ocampo?” Daken asked, lacing the air with charm.

She tilted her head slightly, eyes scanning him up and down. “You here to serve papers or somethin’? That bitch hit me.”

“... No, Ms. Ocampo. My name is Daken Akihiro. I’m from the Xavier Institute,” Daken explained.

Her nose wrinkled slightly and Daken turned the pheromones up a notch. “Oh, so you probably want tuition then. ’s that it?”

“No, Zach’s tuition and board is paid by the alumni association,” Daken said calmly, pushing his pheromones higher. “But I do need to speak to you about Zach, Ms. Ocampo. May I please come in?”

She wavered for a moment. With how much pheromonal charm Daken was throwing at her, she was obviously very annoyed by the visit. Finally she relented, stepping back and pulling the door wider before turning and waving over her shoulder at him. “Through here.”

“Thank you,” Daken said pleasantly, pushing the door shut behind him and curbing his pheromones now that he was past the threshold.

She lead him into a small, cluttered kitchen and gestured loosely at the table as she continued on to the fridge. “You want a beer? Water?” she asked.

“I don’t wish to impose,” Daken replied. She glanced at him, lip curling in annoyance at the non-answer and then opened the fridge and pulled out two bottles of water. She came over to the table and put one in front of him before sitting down. Daken followed suit and cracked the seal on the bottle. “Thank you,” he murmured.

“So what’s this about?” Ocampo asked, watching him closely.

Daken sighed softly, giving a wistful look. “Zach has been struggling, Ms. Ocampo.”

“You callin’ my kid stupid?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“No, not at all. Zach is a very bright child,” Daken replied, shaking his head and then looked her right in the eye. “Ms. Ocampo, yesterday was Zach’s birthday... He was expecting a call or a text from you all day.”

She glared at him hard. “... You’re calling me a bad mother,” she hissed.

“No, Ms. Ocampo--”

“Yes you are!” she snapped.

“My mother tried to kill me with a rifle!” Daken spat out quickly. Ocampo went silent, shocked, and they stared at each other for a few seconds. “I’m not here to judge you, Ms. Ocampo, and given my personal experience with bad mothers and the anecdotes I’ve heard... I wouldn’t call you a bad mother,” Daken said quietly, giving her an imploring expression. “I think you’re overwhelmed. I think you never had the support you needed. Trying to be a single-mother, raising a child while working a job, not having anyone to rely on... That would be a tremendous task with any child, but a mutant child? It’s more than you could handle.”

Ocampo leaned back in her chair, swallowing hard and looking down at the table.
“We both only want what’s best for Zach,” Daken said softly. “You’re afraid. That’s understandable and reasonable. Being the parent of a mutant is dangerous.” She glanced up at him, frowning, her brow drawing in with a hint of confusion. “Hate groups like the Purifiers have been known to come after the parents of mutants... A friend of mine, her entire extended family was murdered just for being related to a mutant.” He closed his eyes and gave her a pained expression. “You have every reason to be frightened, to withdraw... but Zach needs stability, Ms. Ocampo.” he opened his eyes again and met hers once more. “He needs to know what he can count on. And so... it may be time to make a difficult decision.”

She bit he lip, brow knit, staring back at him for a few seconds, before asking, “What kind of decision?”

“We’ve had students before, quite a few more since anti-mutant hate crimes perpetrated against family of mutants started making the news, who have decided that they simply could not provide the support their children needed,” Daken said with a soothing voice and sympathetic expression as he opened his attache case. “I know that this is a very distressing position to be in, and there aren’t words to describe how deeply affecting such a choice is.” He unzipped and inner pocket and reached inside. “And I know that it’s hardly adequate and in no way mitigates the trauma you must be feeling, but I’m afraid that ten-thousand dollars is the best we’re able to offer you to seek counseling or whatever help you feel that you need,” he said, setting a stack of mint-crisp bills with $10,000 printed across the paper ribbon wrapping them.

Ocampo’s eyes grew wide. After a few moments, she poorly effected nonchalance and shrugged one shoulder. “That’s not very much. For counseling,” she said.

“I’m sorry. It’s all we can afford,” Daken said, shaking his head mournfully. “Many of Zach’s peers are also attending on scholarships provided by the alumni.”

“Well, I mean, if that’s all you can do,” Ocampo shrugged again and gave a dismissive huff. “It really only matters what’s best for Zach, right?”

“I agree completely,” Daken nodded.

“So s’ere some papers I gotta sign, or what?”

“I did some research on the flight here, and there’s a few walk-in legal offices nearby where we can go over the necessary documents,” Daken said.

Kitty was sipping a cup of coffee and sorting through her inbox when a knock sounded on her door and she glanced up from the screen. “Come in,” she called. The door opened and Daken walked in, wearing the warmups he usually did for leading workouts in the mornings, but he’d deigned to put on a shirt before coming to her office and he had a couple of manila envelopes in his hand. Kitty studied him for a second as he approached her desk and frowned. “You look less rosy-cheeked than usual,” she noted.

“Haven’t slept,” Daken shrugged dismissively. “My flight got into J.F.K. after four and I had barely enough time to change before I had to be out running morning calisthenics.”

“Where were you?” Kitty asked.

Daken smirked and raised an eyebrow. “Afraid I fell off the wagon and took a ‘job’?”

“Daken, you’re supposed to tell me when you’re leaving the area. That was the deal,” Kitty said
sternly, giving him a hard look. “If you can’t play by the rules you agreed to, you’re going to end up back on the terrorists-wanted-by-the-gov’mint list.”

“You will kindly notice that I did not kidnap Zach,” Daken pointed out.

“And I appreciate that,” Kitty snorted, rolling her eyes.

“I can promise you with absolute certainty that I will never be kidnapping him again,” Daken added.


“You’ll be wanting to update his file.” Daken held one of the manila envelopes out to her.

“His file?” she asked in confusion, taking it and unwinding the string that held it closed, while Daken turned, heading for the door, and left. Kitty slid the papers out of the envelope and started skimming over them. Her eyes grew wider with each page she flipped through. A minute later, she dropped the papers on her desk and then ran through it and her office wall, skidding to a stop in the hall. She spotted Daken sauntering along, almost at the end of it. “WHAT DID YOU DO?!” she shouted.

Daken spun around and grinned at her. “Nothing illegal!” he called back.

“ARE YOU COMPLETELY INSANE?!?”

“Eh.” Daken held up a hand and wiggled it in a so-so gesture, before turning again and disappearing around the corner.

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There was a knock at the door and Zach sighed in annoyance. It wasn’t even time for classes yet, and he was already in for a don’t-try-to-skip-or-you-get-detention lecture? Then the speaker called, “Zach?”

Daken’s voice. Daken was back. Zach sat up, a wave of relief washing over him. He really had come back. “Let him in!” he told the security system and a moment later the door was pushing in. “You’re back!” he said, squirming out from under the covers and sitting up cross-legged.

“May I turn on the light?” Daken asked, stepping into the room and letting the door shut behind him.

“Yeah,” Zach nodded and then blinked quickly as the room brightened.

“I need to talk to you about something,” Daken said, voice calm and quiet, as he walked over and settled on the edge of the bed. He had the big, yellow kind of envelope with him and he started pulling a string off of the button-thing on it.

“What’s that?” Zach asked curiously.

“Legal documents,” Daken answered, pulling some papers out of the envelope and holding them out to Zach. “They’re custody papers, Zach... I went to California yesterday and spoke to your mother.”

Zach frowned slightly, eyes darting up and down the top page, trying to understand any of it. “You- - Wait, you talked to my mom?” he demanded, looking up at Daken.
“Yes, Zach. We agreed that you need to know who you can rely on,” Daken said softly, putting a hand on Zach’s shoulder. “And that if she isn’t up to the task, then that’s something you need to know.”

“Wait...” Zach looked back down at the papers and flipped back and forth through them. “Wait...” he focused on the signature lines and the things written above and below them. “W-Wait... This...” He looked back up at Daken, a knot suddenly in his throat. “... Are you my dad now?” he whispered.

Daken leaned down and kissed his forehead. “You can call me whatever you want, Zach.”

“Oh my God!” Zach gasped. His hands started shaking so bad he had to put the papers down on the bed. “Oh my God!” It was harder and harder to breath and he was hiccuping and wheezing now. “Oh my God!”

“Shhh. It’s okay, just breath,” Daken said, patting his back gently.

“Did you kill her?” Zach asked sharply as the horrifying idea suddenly struck to him.

“W-What? No!” Daken exclaimed, looking genuinely startled. “No, Zach, I didn’t kill your mother! That’s not how custody-transfer works!”

“Okay... Okay...” Zach mumbled, looking down at the blankets by his knee, trying to stop freaking out.

“Zach, she didn’t just throw you out,” Daken said, voice calm again. “We talked about what was best for you, and that the ambiguity of your relationship was causing you stress, and we agreed that you needed a sense of stability.”

“I don’t care,” Zach said suddenly, looking back up.

“Zach--”

“I don’t care. Screw her,” Zach said firmly, shaking his head. Then he lunged forward and wrapped his arms around Daken. “You’re my dad!”

This was officially the best birthday he had ever had.

Chapter End Notes

Four posts in one week! Wheeeeeeee! Confession: I did not write four chapters in one week, fifteen and sixteen were written while I was still doing the Logan-recovery arch, so they've been sitting on my drive while I finished that up. But with this I am caught up to where I'm currently writing, so don't expect me to keep up the pace. I can't do it. Gotta go to work and junk. I love you more than work, but I gotta pay for shit.

I love the ex-villain type characters using villain-methods for non-villain goals. It is one of my favorite things, and I had a lot of fun planning this encounter out. I think this time I actually do need to write a staff meeting...

Zach doesn't have a canon last name! I needed one for his mother, so I Googled up the 20 most common last names in the Philippines and picked one that didn't belong to
any canon characters in the 616. So this is my problem solving.
Daken failed to be chastised.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Daken settled himself at the table in the conference room a minute before the bell ran to announce
the end of second period. He hummed softly as he opened the finance app on his phone and moved
funds around. He yawned and shook himself slightly just as the door opened and Monet walked in.
“Do you know what this emergency meeting is about?” she drawled, settling herself into a chair
across from Daken.

He gave a slight shrug and smirked. “I should certainly hope it involves food. Really, last minute in
the twelve o’clock hour. It’s just a bit inconsiderate, don’t you think?”

Monet scoffed. “Cafeteria sandwiches? ‘Cold cuts’ shaved from the processed, molded meat-stuff
of God knows what animal? You’re welcome to my share.”

“Did you have your prep-period after this? How does bibimbap sound?” Daken asked. “I know a
decent place across the park.”

Monet tilted her head and considered. “That wouldn’t be entirely wretched,” she decided.

One by one the rest of the faculty made their entrances and settled at the table, and finally Pryde
came pushing through the door with a harassed expression and a bundle of papers in her arm.
“What is the emergency, Kitty?” Monroe asked, giving a worried look to Pryde’s obvious stress.

“Well, gosh, that’s a great question! Let’s ask Daken!” Pryde replied, slamming her papers down
on the table and glaring at him.

“I’m not aware of an ‘emergency’,,” Daken said with a shrug.

“I should have brought something to throw at you,” Pryde grumbled, a snarl wrinkling her nose.
“And of course Logan still can’t be bothered to show up.”

“He was expecting to return this weekend or early next week,” Wagner said, watching her with a
worried expression. “What has happened, Katzchen?”

Pryde pressed her hands against the table, casting Daken another glare. “This morning Daken
comes into my office and informs me that Zach Ocampo’s file needs to be updated. Specifically the
part about who his legal guardian is.”

“Oh my God,” Dani said, putting her face in her hands.

“You’re saying Daken just adopted Zach?” Drake asked.

“Jennifer didn’t have time in her schedule to come by today, but I faxed her the papers and she says
it’s completely legal,” Pryde said, finally flopping herself into the chair at the end of the table and
sighing in tired irritation for a moment before turning her eyes to Daken again and narrowing them.
“If you didn’t use your powers.”

“I am well aware that signatures are invalidated by use of coercive meta-human powers. There’s more than half a dozen cases of legal precedent on the matter,” Daken retorted disdainfully. “I am also aware that intimidation or threats invalidate a signature, and that mutants are accused of such tactics four times more often than any other demographic.” He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “You know what doesn’t invalidate a signature though? Putting ten thousand dollars on the table.”

The room went silent for a moment as everybody stared at him. Pryde broke it a few seconds later. “Excuse me?!”

“Compensation for the emotional distress of parting,” Daken sneered. “You should have seen her face. As soon as she saw green, she didn’t care about anything else. She sold her son for barely enough to buy a used sedan. Not only was she a bad mother, she also obviously has no idea what a healthy teenager will go for on the black market.”

“You bought him?!” Pryde demanded, outrage etched across her face as her eyes grew wider.

“No, That would be illegal. I compensated Ms. Ocampo, which is perfectly legal, ask Ms. Walters,” Daken retorted.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” Drake broke in. “You just bought a child off of his own mother, and you’re sitting here telling us that there’s nothing wrong with that? Did your messed up childhood really fuck you up so badly that you can’t see how incredibly wrong that is?”

Daken turned his eyes to Drake and pinned him with a glare. “Firstly,” he said quietly. “Yes. It did. Secondly,” he leaned forward, bracing his arms against the table. “Tuesday was Zach’s birthday. He’s fifteen now. He waited the entire day for his mother to send him some kind of casual, insincere, ‘happy birthday’ message. But she couldn’t be bothered. He cried himself to sleep,” Daken explained in a slow, quiet voice. “Wednesday morning, he told me that what he wanted was certainty. I weighed that, and considered the fact that she hadn’t cared when a pair of X-Men showed up on her step and told her that they were taking away her son, who had been missing for three days without the police ever even being contacted.” He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. “I decided that a woman who simply does. not. care. about her child should not be making his legal and medical decisions for him. This isn’t like adopting an infant. Zach can feed and dress himself. He doesn’t need a caretaker at this stage in his life, he needs to know someone cares about him.”

“And you decided that that should be you,” Pryde said coolly.

“That part was decided by you, actually. Because out of every responsible adult in this building, I am the only one who has bothered to care about him,” Daken retorted. “Why do you think it was so easy for me to subvert Zach? Do you think I just used my powers on him and that was that? No. You and your staff failed to make a vulnerable child feel wanted or even safe here.” Daken listened to Pryde’s pulse, and the rest of the room, tasting a mix of guilt, anger and embarrassment on the air. “His mother’s ambiguous indifference was causing Zach pain and uncertainty. I made a decision to address and rectify that so he would be able to move forward. And just to be perfectly clear, Zach does not know, nor does he ever need to know, that his mother sold him.”

There was another lull for a few seconds before Jubilee spoke up. “Daken’s right. Nobody wants to say it, but Daken’s right,” she announced, lifting up her hands a little bit and the pressing them flat on the table-top. “I mean, we probably shouldn’t be adopting all the mutant kids ever, and not even all the angry mutant kids ever, because, damn, that would be so much paperwork. But we should
be making them feel safe and wanted. We should be paying attention enough to notice when a kid’s not okay.” She pursed her lips and swallowed, looking down at her hands with emotions twisting her features for a moment. “We shouldn’t-- We shouldn’t find out from a kid’s roommate that they’re trying to slowly kill themselves. That’s– That’s the kind of shit we should notice. We’re supposed to be god damned teachers.”

Having tipped the first domino, Daken sat back to watch the rest topple.

“I think maybe we could schedule a training seminar,” Rachel said softly, a knuckle pressed against her bottom lip. “Have somebody come in to teach us what signs we should be watching for... Even with ‘normal’ teenagers, depression is a pretty widespread problem, but with our demographic, it’s probably double even in the best circumstances.”

“Paige can only give us two days a week because of her class-load, maybe we need to look at hiring another counselor part-time?” Monroe suggested.

“That’s only half the solution though,” Rachel replied, turning to her. “All of us need to be able to spot the warning signs, so that we’re able to refer the students who need counseling.”

“What about setting up an anonymous dropbox where students can send a message if they think one of their mates is having trouble?” Starsmore asked, glancing at Rachel and then away again, tilting his head. “Course that won’t work if they think their mate might get expelled for self-harming behavior...” he murmured a bit softer.

Pryde narrowed her eyes slightly and clenched her jaw for a moment. “Good idea,” she said tightly. “I’ll look into groups that specialize in this kind of training. Hopefully we can get a weekend seminar scheduled soon, and they’ll probably have more ideas about promoting awareness among the student body as well,” Rachel said.

“Any new student who comes to the school should be in mandatory counseling for at least the first month,” Monet interjected. “We will need another counselor coming in at least part-time to manage that, but it should be done.”

“This seems prudent,” Wagner nodded slowly. “The shock of discovering one is a mutant is surly difficult enough that any student needs some extra help adjusting, and a month will perhaps give the counselor enough time to assess which students should need to continue with their sessions longer.”

“This is the second time Daken’s pointed out a blind-spot in student morale issues,” Dani said, leaning her elbows against the table. “Most of us grew up in this and watched a classmate die before we graduated and, well, we grew calluses to survive. We turned tragedy into our ‘normal’. The outsider perspective, it’s a good shakeup.” She looked across at Daken.

“A fresh set of eyes and a cynical tongue,” Monet noted with a smirk, leaning back in her chair.

“Oh, so you like my tongue?” Daken drawled.

“Let’s see about that bibimbap first,” Monet replied.

“But the fact that a fresh set of eyes can just waltz in and see cracks everywhere, it’s because we’re too insular, because we bias towards hiring alumni, people with the exact same calluses as us,” Aquilla said, frowning.

“Alumni are generally the only people we can get,” Pryde sighed. “The pay’s lousy and a day
when the worst thing that happens is picketers showing up to protest our genetics is a good day?” She sighed, shaking her head. “We’re here out of loyalty to each other and an ideal, and we’re here because we know a lot more of these kids would be dead without it… We’re here because it’s the best we can do for them, and we’ve all made the personal decision to put that first. But it’s a harder thing to sell to an ‘outsider’.”

“Depends on the outsider,” Dani said, tapping a fingernail against the table and looking contemplative. “And just how much of an outsider they are… I know a very good ‘outsider’ therapist who I think might consider the position.”

Pryde glanced at her with a raised eyebrow and nodded slightly. “Okay, meet me in my office when you’ve got time,” she said, and then took a deep breath and sighed. “Anybody else? Questions? Concerns?”

There was a momentary contemplative lull, then Daken sat forward and leaned one elbow on the table. “I’ve initiated a wire transfer to reimburse Zach’s tuition and board over the past year,” he drawled casually. “You’ll see another one at the start of summer term. He’s not a scholarship student anymore, and I wouldn’t want to take opportunities away from any less financially-fortunate children.”

He heard Pryde grit her teeth. “Thank you,” she said, and then pushed herself to her feet. “If anybody thinks of any suggestions on this topic, please let me know or shoot me an email. Thank you, everybody, for coming.”

Once she had left the room, the rest of the faculty started to get to their feet. “So, bibimbap, huh?” Jubilee asked, cocking her head to the side and casting Monet a smirk.

“On don’t make a thing of it, Jubes. We’re just two beautiful, fashionable, sophisticated and all around superior people getting lunch together,” Monet sniffed dismissively and then glanced at Daken. “Do you think I should change, or will this be sufficient for the venue?”

“A six hundred dollar Marc Jacobs?” Daken asked and pretended to consider. “I suppose it’ll do if your Dior is at the cleaners.”

“Hm,” she smirked wide, turning her head a little and side-eyeing him. “Well, it’s only lunch, after all.”

“Daken,” Dani called. He turned as her hand landed on his arm. “Rachel says you’re going to be doing some powers-tutoring,” she said, an odd mix of pain and solace shining in her eyes.

“Yes. When summer session starts,” Daken nodded and then was slightly startled as Dani moved forward suddenly and wrapped her arms around him.

“… I wish you’d been here six years ago,” she whispered.

“… That would have been nice,” Daken replied softly, returning the embrace. “Hypocrisies, annoyances and all, this is a much nicer place than where I was six years ago.”

Chapter End Notes

I wasn't originally planning this chapter to stick on the topic of depression quite so
long, but it felt right as I was writing, so I went with it. And oh what timing, because guess what month it is... It's Suicide Awareness Month. Or maybe Suicide Prevention Month. Or Suicide Prevention Awareness Month. It's one of those. Some combination of those words. I live at latitude 48 and it rains basically every day for 8 months out of the year, making seasonal-depression a pretty big thing here, so my city gets pretty into this particular awareness month and the news and radio play messages and set up a lot of events around it. I have an autoimmune disorder that attacks my thyroid, and the symptoms of hypothyroidism are pretty close to identical to major depressive disorder; I'm treated now, but I wasn't for a very long time and even now the medications are finicky.

Awareness! The statistic that's being blared on my local radio stations this month is that 1 in 5 people will, at some point in their life, be diagnosed with a mental illness or mood/anxiety disorder, sometimes one that can get better, sometimes not. Even if you never experience any kind of mental illness yourself, it is likely you will know someone who does at some point in your life. It sucks, but please don't be afraid of the topic, because it is something that you will probably either experience or encounter. Listen listen listen, talk talk talk, that is the most important thing.
Bobby’s ears were pricked as he walked down the hall, straining for the sounds of anybody nearby, nervous, self-conscious. Why? He wasn’t doing anything wrong. He wasn’t doing anything embarrassing. He was just being a concerned citizen. This was totally normal. Bobby stopped in front of the door, straining his ears for a moment and forcing himself not to look guiltily up and down the hall, before knocking. He paused for a second or two and then called, “It’s Bobby.”

A few more seconds passed with nothing happening. Bobby had passed the beautiful, fashionable, sophisticated and all around superior Monet in the hall on the way out of his last class of the day, so in theory, Daken should be back. Unless he had other, better things to be doing somewhere else. Which he probably did. Bobby was about to turn and leave when he heard the door unlatch but stay where it was. Nobody was pulling it open and inviting him in, Daken had simply told the security system to unlock it. Bobby pursed his lips for a moment and then pushed at it, stepping in. He spotted Daken immediately, since he was right in the middle of the front area, lying on his back, head turned slightly to stare blankly at Bobby.

“Yes?”

“You’re on the floor,” Bobby noted, and then felt dumb. He took another step and pushed the door shut behind him.

“Did you need something?” Daken asked, raising an eyebrow.

“About- About the meeting, I-- It came out wrong. I wasn’t trying to be a jerk,” Bobby said, shifting on his feet slightly, feeling awkward. His eyes kept finding their way to Daken’s chest, where a circled four sat amid a field of warm blue. He’d been wearing it at the meeting too. Nobody else had seemed to find it odd, but wasn’t it? “And yesterday, when I said Zach was probably just skipping... That was lame. I shouldn’t have assumed. I- I’m sorry.”

“What are you apologizing to me?” Daken gave him a bored look. “So you don’t care about your students. So what? It’s no concern of mine.”

It felt like a punch. It hurt and it made him angry, defensive. “I care about my students!” Bobby protested.

“You care about them like a collie cares about sheep,” Daken scoffed.

Bobby gritted his teeth and told himself to stay calm. He was trying to turn this into another fight. Bobby’s eyes flicked to the four on Daken’s chest again. “... I have a lot of students,” he said.

“Yes, and you don’t have the right disposition for teaching,” Daken replied and lifted an arm to
point at his face. “Hey, do you mind? My eyes are up here.”

Bobby let out an angry little huff and used the second jab as an excuse to ignore the first. “What’s with the shirt?”

“Do you like it?” Daken asked with a smug grin.

“It’s not really your style.”

“It’s not really my shirt.” Daken gave a little shrug and a hum. “But Johnny had burned my clothes off. I couldn’t very well make my exit in the buff.”

Bobby’s molars ground against each other; he hated the sound of it in his own ears, and it made his jaw ache.

Daken rolled onto his side, facing Bobby, still infuriatingly smug. “He gave me this and a pair of his jeans... They were nice, comfortable, a mid-level kind of label: high quality but not boutique-chic,” he mused with a dreamy smile, closing his eyes. “He watched me get dressed... then he made me take it all off again... seeing me in his cloths got him excited, and he needed to fuck me senseless.”

Bobby bit his lip, closed his eyes, counted to ten in his head. His stomach was clenched up. There was no legitimate reason for him to be pissed off right now. He’d asked about the damn shirt. Maybe he’d wanted to be told the exact opposite of what he just heard, and maybe Daken was deliberately winding him up, but he shouldn’t have started this.

“That was the last time.”

Bobby opened his eyes and blinked, startled. The voice had sounded so small and sad. He looked down at Daken again to find him still on his side but now curled up, knees and arms drawn close to him. “... What do you mean?” Bobby asked, confused by the sudden melancholy.

“... I left New York that night... Two months later, I heard he was dead,” Daken said quietly, the expression on his face was pained and his voice was pinched.

“... Daken, Johnny’s alive. You saw him last week,” Bobby protested.

“It doesn’t matter now. It’s broken,” Daken said.

Part of Bobby’s brain was screaming at him to just agree, it was broken and it could never be fixed, and Daken should just forget about Johnny... That part of his brain was a dick-head. Bobby was better than that. He wanted to be better than that. A crush did not equal entitlement. Daken wasn’t his, and Bobby had no right to sabotage his potential happiness. Bobby bit his lip for a moment and then crouched down in front of him. “Does it have to be? I mean, are you still just angry at him for talking to Rogue about you?” he asked and mentally kicked himself as he saw Daken’s eyes narrow. He was supposed to be not-sabotaging. “He- He mentioned why you were mad at him when he came over here to kick my ass for talking shit at you. It’s the same thing, right? He’s really earnest like that. Opening up about his feelings and whatever probably just comes so naturally he doesn’t think about it.”

Daken stared at him. “My god, have you ever even met him?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s fake, you idiot! That whole sweet, lackadaisical bimbo act is completely and utterly fake,”
Daken gave a humorless laugh. “You’re talking about him like you’re his friend, like you know who he is, and it’s a fucking joke! You didn’t know he was bi, and you don’t even realize that he puts on an act for his adoring public? How do you not notice that he always mugs for the camera?”

Bobby was silent for a few seconds. In his mind he found that he had to agree with Daken: he was an idiot. He shouldn’t have gotten himself into this conversation. Bobby wet his lip, looking down for a moment and then lifted his head to meet Daken’s eyes again. “Because we’ve never been close. We’re just work-buddies sometimes,” he said quietly. “He’s a great guy. He puts in a hundred percent without being dramatic about it. I like him, but we’ve both always had our own stuff going on, and I never put in the effort to get to know him better.”

“... Oh my, self-analyzing honestly. There’s a shock.” Daken raised an eyebrow at him.

“Okay, can I just ask-- is there ever a right answer with you?” Bobby demanded, annoyed. “Is there anything I can say that’s good enough for you? That you’re not going to throw back in my face?”

Daken stared blankly at him for a few seconds and before slowly sitting up. Then his hand snapped out, not at all slowly, and grabbed Bobby’s face. Daken was fast, without question, but Bobby should have reacted; he should be reacting now, reflexively icing up, but he wasn’t. He felt sluggish and apathetic. Pheromones? Daken’s fingers clamped down on the edge of his jaw, digging in so hard Bobby was pretty sure he was going to have little fingertip bruises. He held still, clenching his teeth as Daken got his knees under him and leaned in close, putting his mouth an inch from Bobby’s ear.

“Gambit thinks I should be nicer to you,” he whispered, breath tickling, and Bobby swallowed, trying not to focus on how close he was. “Is that what you want, Snowflake? You want me to be nice?”

Mood-swings like a damn wrecking-ball. “... I don’t even know what you expect me to say here,” Bobby said through his teeth.

“Oh, I expect you to succumb to your whiteboy sense of entitlement and say ‘Yes, you’re so mean, what did I ever do to deserve it?’”

“I know what I did.”

“Do you?” Daken hissed. “If you’d frozen anyone without a healing factor, where would they be now?” His nails dug in and Bobby was half expecting the claws to make an appearance. “If you’d shoved a giant, razor-sharp, novelty snowflake through anybody else, what would have happened?”

“Daken--”

“You killed me. Twice. And you did it with a sense of humor, didn’t you?” Daken growled, and Bobby thought his thumbnail might have just broken the skin. “You. cut. me. in. half, you son of a bitch, but I’m the mean one, is that right?”

“... I’m sorry,” Bobby whispered. “If I could take it back--”

“You can’t take that back.”

“I know. I know I can’t,” Bobby closed his eyes. “I am more sorry and ashamed about that than almost anything I’ve ever done.”

“Ohhh, and I bet it rips you apart, doesn’t it? You have to live with it every day, don’t you?”
Daken simpered sarcastically. “I have to smell you every day. I have to have my nose rubbed in my failure--”

“What failure?” Bobby interjected, confused.

“... I told myself nobody would ever hurt me like that again,” Daken’s voice lost a bit of the edge in favor of a hollowness. “But since I made myself that promise, five have. And all five are breathing right now. The only two things I’ve ever been good at are killing and surviving, and now I don’t even have claim to those anymore.”

“Those aren’t the only things you’re good at,” Bobby said, guilt mixing with reluctant pity.

“No, you’re right, there’s a third thing. But you declined a sample.”

“Daken, I… I know I owe you more than an apology. I know it’s not the kind of thing I can just ‘make up’ for, but... I want to do something,” Bobby said, gaze flickering down and away. “If you think there’s something I should be doing, just… please tell me.”

Daken was silent for a few seconds and then let Bobby go. “I’ll think about it,” he said, and then climbed to his feet and walked toward the door. Bobby frowned and got up, turning around and watching for a moment before following him out of the room.

“I’m serious though, I mean, you brought it up, do you need to talk? About Johnny?” Bobby asked.

“You brought it up,” Daken corrected as he started heading in the direction of the patio. “Just like you’re pressing the subject now. You’re so terribly interested in what may or may not be happening between Johnny and me.”

“You seem pretty upset about it being ‘over’, but, I mean, Johnny’s not dead, and he’s between relationships, and- and you’re in love with him, aren’t you?” Bobby heard his own voice get weaker at the end as a queasy feeling settled in his stomach.

“My addictions are none of your business,” Daken scoffed, pulling the patio door open and stepping out.

“‘Addictions’?” Bobby demanded following him. As soon as he was through the door, his eyes caught sight of Dani and Amara sunbathing on deckchairs, and by generally accepted rules of decorum and politeness, you don’t call your doctor to ask about weird growths on the subway or talk loudly about relationships in public spaces. But Bobby was too hung up on that word, that thought, to let it go right now. “You think love is an ‘addiction’?”

“Yes, that is generally what a chemical dependence is called, Drake,” Daken replied, apparently unfazed by the girls’ presence. “Love is just a biological instinct for the perpetuation of species, to which philosophers and poets have erroneously assigned higher meaning.”

“Are you serious right now?” Bobby asked, following him as Daken zigzagged a little, apparently not sure where he wanted to park himself. “What about family-love? What about Laura and Gabby? You love them.”

“Family and ‘tribe’ also serve a function within evolutionary biology. That feeling of love for a child is meant to keep us from eating our young like rodents,” Daken retorted. “And the desire for family-togetherness facilitates the safety-in-numbers principal.”

“You literally just adopted a child!” Bobby protested.
“I never said I was immune to emotions, only that I’m not so pretentious as to assign religious meaning to simple biological reflexes,” Daken said, pausing next to the edge of the patio and bracing his hands on the parapet, his back to Bobby. “Emotions are just neurons firing in your brain. They’re vestigial survival instincts that humanity, in our arrogance, has glorified to the point of spirituality. It’s all chemical. Love is the drug. Literally. And I am a god damned drug dealer. Do you think I couldn’t make you feel ‘love’ right now? It would take even less effort than saying it.”

“Amara! No!”

Dani’s shout came not half a second before a blast of incomprehensible heat was accompanied by an enraged scream. Bobby’s eyes widened in shock and horror as the super-heated air tore past him so forcefully it pushed Daken right over the parapet even while it scorched, setting his clothes and hair ablaze as he was thrown. “Daken!” Bobby gasped, icing up, barely picking up one foot before Amara ran right past him, fully molten, and leapt.

“Amara! Wait!” Dani called again, jumping after Bobby onto his ice-slide as he chased her down to the ground. “Stop!”

“Jupiter damn you, Manuel!” Amara was screaming.

Bobby raised an ice-wall between her and Daken, pouring it on as fast as he could and it wasn’t fast enough, she was still making headway. Bobby bit his lip and started building ice-golems to coral her as Dani, who’s bikini had turned itself into Asgardian armor, uprooted a tree to push at her with. “He’s not Manuel, Amara!” Bobby yelled, glancing down at Daken, trying to keep the ice away from him for fear of extreme cold doing more damage to his abused flesh. He looked like a hotdog that had been forgotten on the grill.

“Rachel!” Dani was shouting now, having given up on reasoning with Amara.

“I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you, Manuel. I told you I would! You son of a jackal! How dare you come to me here!” Amara kept screaming. “How dare you defile this sanctuary! I will send you to Lord Pluto as nothing but ash!”

“He’S NOT MANUEL!” Bobby and Dani shouted in unison.

“DO NOT DEFEND HIM! BETRAYERS!” Amara bellowed.

“AMARA!” Rachel’s voice cut through, and suddenly Amara was being lifted up off the ground in a teke hamster-ball. She howled wordlessly in a voice that was barely human as Rachel pulled her higher into the sky, getting her away from the ground and away from Daken.

As her screaming grew thin, Bobby turned around, leaving his walls and golems where they were as he ran a few steps and dropped to his knees, shifting out of ice-form. “Shit shit shit shit shit shit!” He hovered over Daken for a few seconds, feeling simultaneous relief and anguish at the tiny sound of whimpers. He was alive. He looked like a damn hotdog, but he was alive. “Shhh, shhh, it’s going to be okay,” Bobby whispered, hesitantly touching his fingertips to Daken’s skin, making as little contact with the ravaged tissue as possible, and concentrating carefully as he tried to arrest continuing heat-damage and chill his subcutaneous layer without dropping Daken’s core-temperature too quickly.

“Oh God. I should have grabbed her sooner. I knew she was starting to freak out before--” Dani muttered guiltily. “I should have reached out. I should have-- I saw her snap.”
“There’s plenty of should-have to go around,” Bobby said, picking up his hands slowly, moving to a different spot and starting there. He could see the blackened, charred skin on Daken’s head, neck and shoulder, starting to flake away as new, smooth and pale skin took its place. The places Bobby had already cooled were healing faster, he was making a difference, taking some of the burden off of Daken’s healing factor. He kept going as Daken started to cough and curl in on himself more. Part of him was aware that there were other people around the area now, attracted by the commotion, but Bobby’s attention was only on Daken.

By the time Bobby had finished doing as much as he could, Daken’s skin was already starting to darken into its usual sun-kissed glow. He’d curled in on himself more as his skin apparently healed enough to let him move a little bit, and he was almost in a fetal position now. When Bobby leaned back for a moment, turning from where he’d just finished cooling Daken’s calves and feet, to look at his face, he noticed that Daken’s hair was growing in evenly over his scalp and around his jaw. Of course it _would_, but the sight still felt odd and alien. Bobby scooted sideways a little and laid one hand gently on Daken’s upturned shoulder, running the other through his new hair. “Daken?” he called. “You with us?”

Daken’s eyes opened about halfway and blinked twice. His arms were already tucked close to his chest, but Bobby watched his wrist swivel around and Daken’s fingers opened up and then brushed down over his own collarbone. “... My shirt,” he whispered, his brow drawing in as a look of quiet agony flashed across his face.

The shirt. The shirt Johnny had given him. Crap. “Daken, hey, it’ll be okay,” Bobby said softly and kept petting his hair.

“Daken,” Ororo’s voice called and Bobby glanced up to see her kneeling down next to them, a cheep terry robe in hand, the kind they kept for nudemergencies. “It’s Ororo. You’re safe now. Let’s get you to your room so that you may rest and recover.” She took his wrist and tried to slide the sleeve of the robe onto his arm.

“No!” Daken snapped, pulling his arm away from her and twisting toward Bobby, reaching for him.

“Hey, calm down, calm down, shhh,” Bobby caught him and steadied him. “You’re naked on the front lawn. You just gotta put on the robe so we can get you past all the teenagers desperately trying to get a better view.”

“For the sake of the school’s accreditation, I must ask you not to parade yourself nude in front of the students,” Ororo said gently, trying again to ease him into the robe as Bobby helped Daken sit up.

As soon as Ororo had gotten Daken’s right arm into the robe and started trying for the left, Daken reached out, grabbing a handful of Bobby’s shirt and leaning into his shoulder. He was still trembling slightly and breathing with a ragged edge of hysteria. “It’s okay. It’s okay,” Bobby murmured, pulling the robe closed as Ororo reached around Daken to tie it.

“Hey! Damn it, I _told_ you--” Kitty’s voice snapped.

“Daken!” Zach was there a moment later, thumping down onto the soot that used to be grass, throwing one arm around Daken and slapping at Bobby with the other. “Don’t touch him!”

“Hey!” Bobby protested, fending him off.

“What did you _do_ to him?!” Zach demanded, glaring at Bobby.
“Damn it, Zach, you’re sitting on charcoal! Why and how do you think I did this?!” Bobby retorted.

“Zach, please calm down,” Ororo said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Daken is dazed at the moment and your anger is going to agitate him. We need to get him to his room so he can rest. Please, let’s help him up.”

Zach cast Bobby one more glare before pulling Daken’s arm around his shoulders and helping Ororo get him to his feet. Bobby stayed where he was, in the char and soot, watching them guide Daken back into the building. After a minute, Kitty crunched over the crispy ground and crouched next to him, “Rachel says she’s gotten Amara calmed down. Can you come in and tell me how this went down?” she asked.

“Yeah. Sure,” Bobby nodded, pushing himself up as his mind raced, trying to figure out where to start the recounting.

Chapter End Notes

Daken mentioned five people who had hurt him deep since he promised himself not to take anymore shit. I’m gonna come right out and share the point he made that decision and the list of people. He made the decision after meeting Laura and deciding to set some goals and seek out a sense of purpose. The list is, in order, Marcus Roston, Donna Kiel, Logan, Mister Sinister (there wasn't any emotional connection here, but Sinister made him feel helpless in a pretty raw way), and Bobby.

I wrote a little bit of action! That's super rare for me! This is a scene that's been vivid in my head for a while, before the rest of Shallot had really started to coalesce. When I started writing, I wasn't sure where it would go, but this just kind of flowed together and I’m happy with it.
Daken goes for a run to clear his head.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings:
- Graphic self harm
- Suicidal thoughts

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The bathwater had gone cold. It was one of the many shortcomings of American bathtubs, no heater. One was meant to fill it with the hottest water one could stand, and then sit as it faded from scalding to tepid, with only a few minutes of comfort in the middle. Or let out some of the water and top it off every twenty minutes. What else should be expected from a culture based around waste and ‘good enough’ standards?

The lack of a heater was probably for the best though, Daken decided, as he ran a claw slowly down the inside of his arm again. The water was getting quite dark now, and he wouldn’t want a pump to get clogged. The ribbon of red curled itself around his arm and dripped from his elbow for a few moments as the fizzle zipped itself shut and smoothed over again in its wake, leaving no trace. Daken stared at the flawless plane of his skin for a minute or two before repeating.

Rachel and Pryde had taken nearly an hour of his time calmly explaining what had happened and why. Assuring him that it wasn’t his fault (of course it wasn’t his fault) and that Aquilla was very contrite and would likely be apologizing to him later but was quite distraught at the moment. They were worried he might retaliate. He understood it, images, sounds, smells, feelings, playing back through his mind so intense and tangible he thought he was there. He knew that kind of waking nightmare. And he didn’t care that she’d burned him, nearly killed him. But she’d also stolen something from him.

Daken laid the palm of his left hand open from the base of his index finger to carpus, claw scraping against the bone as it traveled. He shouldn’t have been wearing it. Johnny’s shirt had been one of the things kept in his safety deposit box in Los Angeles. After parting ways with Zach’s mother, Daken had stopped by the bank, emptied the box and closed the account. Stupid. As often as this school had been blown up, torn down or otherwise levelled, he should have known better than to bring anything precious and irreplaceable here.

Daken swallowed, his throat dry and uncomfortable, as he drew a line from the web of his thumb down to his inner elbow. Dehydration was beginning to drag at him. Dehydration and hunger as his healing factor cannibalized non-vital tissues to replace all the red ribbons that had dissolved into the bathwater. He hadn’t bled himself this much in a while. Maybe he’d pass out soon. Dehydrated to the point of incapacitation while sitting in so many liters of water. He could drown in his own blood. Would that be poetic or just pathetic?

He stared at his hand, the slice had finished closing itself and there were just a few little flecks of blood clinging to the skin. He couldn’t let himself drown, not now. He had responsibilities now that he didn’t have two days ago. Responsibilities that meant he had to let all the red that had escaped him now escape down the drain, shower off the residue, and go drink something. Eat something. Live a while longer.
It was a quarter to nine; Zach would still be awake, and so Daken avoided the possibility of encountering him, and being again trapped by his unnecessary worry, by leaving his suite through the window and escaping into the twilit park. He took off north up the bridal path, running flat out for a while, branching away from the reservoir and on through the fading evening. As he was passing the baseball fields, a woman with a medium-length blond ponytail and perfectly coordinated magenta activewear drew up alongside him and matched his pace.

“I heard there was some excitement at the school today,” she said.

“You ‘heard’?” Daken rolled his eyes and slowed to an easy jog.

“Your lawn faces the park, with no hedge to obscure it,” she pointed out. “Rather a lot of rubberneackers will be watching it on any given day with their phones at the ready, waiting for something to happen.”

“And how many Youtube videos now feature me crashing to the earth in flames?” Daken asked.

“I didn’t feel the need to pursue it further than to know it happened,” she said, shaking her head. “But what happened, exactly? I told you to be careful.”

“Do you think I’d be out for a casual evening stroll if I were in trouble?” Daken scoffed.

“Why did she attack you?”

“Because she’s a troubled girl, and she had a little P.T.S.D. episode in my direction,” Daken scoffed. “It’s nothing, move on.”

“I’m worried about you.”

“Yes, you said that last time,” Daken said. “What makes you believe you have the right to mother me?”

She was quiet for a while. Hurt. Finally she said, “You’re very snippy tonight. The incident has obviously upset you to some degree.”

Daken gave an irritated sigh. “Have you set up a contract yet?”

“I have. I think you’ll be pleased,” she replied.

“Who?”

“Let it be a surprise. It’s more fun that way.” She tilted her head up and cast him a smirk.

“I don’t like surprises,” Daken retorted.

“Well I do,” she said.

Daken gritted his teeth for a moment. “They’re satisfied with the commission?”

“I think we might have gotten a discount if I’d said who the mark was before we discussed numbers,” she chuckled. “It’s always nice to have an enthusiastic patsy.”

Daken wrinkled his nose in distaste. “And what about the parties taking delivery?”
“I’m still working on it,” she said with a little sigh. “Zealots take a great deal more care than mercs.”

“I’d like to do this sooner rather than later,” Daken said.

“And I’d like to do it right,” she shot back, giving him a look. “You haven’t been out of the game that long, you know sloppiness has its cost, and I rather thought you wanted the package to arrive in good condition.”

“... Yes,” Daken nodded. “But I’ve read the files you gave me and it’s clear that that condition becomes more tenuous with every passing day.”

“True, and I’m working as fast as I can without cutting corners,” she assured him.

“Thank you.”

“Aw, such a polite boy,” she grinned up at him. “Has the situation with Bobby improved any? Or did you ignore my advice?”

“You’re advice was so insultingly obvious as to be next to useless.”

“Well. I was only trying to help.”

“I think somebody gave him a scolding after I made a brief trip to Madripoor,” Daken said.

She laughed. “Was it supposed to be brief?” she asked. “I’m rather glad Erik’s little girl dragged you back home by the ear.”

Daken grimaced. Well, he’d set her to the task because she was good, so perhaps it would be disappointing if she hadn’t known. “It was a lapse.”

“I should say so. Your departure would have made all of this rather pointless, wouldn’t it?” she said. “... So you think he’s been scolded? Is he behaving himself now?”

“He continues to be overall annoying, but I think he’s trying to be friendly,” Daken shrugged slightly, thinking back on the afternoon. “And apparently he wants to make good for that little slip of temper when we first met.”

“Oh really.”

“Today he offered me a favor, more or less,” Daken noted. “Restrictions and caveats were not discussed, but I think I could leverage it well enough.”

“That is useful,” she agreed. “If properly handled, he could simplify the end-game quite a bit... Of course, if fumbled, he’d complicate.”

“I’m not an amatuer.”

“Of course not, but you’ve gotten a little too close to all this,” she signed. “You got invested, and that makes it impossible for you to be a professional here. And if you’re not a professional...”

“I can handle Drake,” Daken cast her a glare.

“If you can’t, then just don’t use him. We control all the cards, we can manage with the resources we’ve got,” she said.
“I know. I’ll be careful,” Daken replied. “As you said, I’m invested now. I won’t let this go sideways.”

“And I won’t throw any wrenches into the works,” she said, tilting her head and looking up at him. “I would have nothing to gain by the failure. And enough to lose.”

“You’re in a very maternal mood tonight”

“Am I not allowed to be fond?”

“I’ll find it appreciable if it turns out to be sincere,” Daken sighed, shaking his head. “When you get fond I have to worry that you’re working me.”

“Because it’s what you would do?” She gave him a long, meaningful stare. “Does looking into the mirror unsettle you? I may as well be your mother, you clearly take after me.”

“I don’t want a mother. I have enough to worry about, and I’m past that need,” Daken said, turning his eyes forward and glaring at the semi-darkness.

“Maybe so, but we’re friends, aren’t we?”

“... So much as people like us can have friends, I suppose,” Daken said noncommittally. “I don’t believe that you have a reason to want to hurt me, and so I suppose I just need to hope that your statement about having nothing to gain was true.”

“Trust in my pragmatism,” she suggested. “You’ve made yourself vulnerable with this, and I’ve the good sense to recognize that if I hurt you now of all times, I wouldn’t just lose a friend, I’d lose a valuable ally. It would simply be impractical.”

“Maybe pragmatism is all we have at the end of the day,” Daken murmured, breaking his jog and settling into a walk. “I should probably trust you as far as I trust myself then.”

“Does that mean not at all?” she asked, and a moment later she slipped her hand into his. “... This venture of yours isn’t a pragmatic one. You’ve made the decision with your heart rather than your brain.”

“You think it’s a mistake?” Daken asked, glancing down at her.

“Not at all,” she shook her head. “Some of the best decisions I’ve made were with my foolish heart. Some of the worst too, of course, but that hardly matters. I think you have to do this, and I think you should.”

“... Thank you.”

She hugged his arm for a moment and then pulled away again. “I’ll be in touch,” she promised, striking out again and jogging away from him. Daken watched her disappear into the darkness before he turned down a trail to his right and started running again, easing into the rhythm and letting it quiet his thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

Super tired tonight and can't think of anything to add here. Screw it. I'm going to bed.
Daken has a real-talk. Or several.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bobby knew that he was too distracted through homeroom, but the students hadn’t seemed to mind; they took the opportunity to whisper and giggle amongst themselves and otherwise goof off. As soon as the bell rang, he was out the door and hurrying toward the staff kitchen. When he pushed into the room, Bobby felt a surge of relief to find Daken sitting in his usual spot with coffee and book. “Hi,” Bobby said immediately, and then felt dumb and self-conscious as Daken glanced up at him and stared silently. “I- I just...” he stammered.

“Thank you for your assistance,” Daken said tonelessly.

Bobby faltered for a moment, standing on the other side of the table, shifting awkwardly. “… ‘Thank you for your assistance’? Really? That’s it?”

“You expected something more?” Daken asked, raising an eyebrow. “Maybe you’d like me to thank you from my knees? Somewhere a bit more private?”

“N-No, that’s-- I just meant that it-- it sounded really form-letter. I... I wanted to know if you’re okay,” Bobby flustered, and then squared himself and pulled out the chair across from Daken, sitting down. “I mean, obviously physically it’s water off a duck--”

“‘Water off a duck’?” Daken demanded, glaring hotly.

“Nononononono!” Bobby protested. “I meant-- I meant that you heal so quickly, that looking at you isn’t a good indicator of how okay or not-okay you are.”

Daken settled into a more moderate glare and took a sip of his coffee. “I’m fine.”

“Are you?” Bobby pressed.

“Never.”

Bobby bit his lip and glanced down for a moment. “... Have you talked to Amara about it?” he asked.

“Not yet,” Daken shrugged. “I’ve no intention of crowding her. She can come to me when she feels comfortable doing so. Or not.”

“Wow. You’re... really understanding about somebody almost killing you, huh?” Bobby noted.

“She wasn’t in her right mind,” Daken replied in a lazy, casual way. “Not like you.”

“I’m sorry,” Bobby muttered, looking down at the table, feeling uncomfortable and annoyed.

“Mm, I wonder if you’re sorry for the right reasons,” Daken mused, taking another sip of coffee.

Bobby grimaced. “Y’know, usually when people talk about ‘the right reasons’, it’s are you doing something for the right reasons. Sorry isn’t something one does, it’s something one feels.”

“And is the reason you feel sorry because I ventilated your California dime?” Daken asked.
Bobby faltered again, slightly thrown by having his point undone so easily. “... That... I’m sorry for hurting you... Are you sorry for ‘ventilating’ Judah?”

“Why should I be sorry for saving his life?” Daken replied, taking a sip.

Bobby stared at him, speechless for a few seconds. “You tried to kill him.”

Daken scoffed, rolling his eyes. “How are you with statistics?” he asked.

“I’m a math teacher,” Bobby shot back.

“There are different kinds of math.”

“I’m good with statistic,” Bobby growled through his teeth.

“So tell me, what are the odds that you could stab a man, at random, three times in the chest without hitting heart, lungs or any major arteries?” Daken asked.

Bobby was silent for a while, hardly breathing. “... I’d have to know the average area of the chest and vital organs when flattened into a plane perpendicular with the vector of entry,” he whispered.

“... You weren’t trying to kill him.”

“I’m sure you have enough of a general sense about the statistics involved to recognize that I was indeed trying very hard not to kill him,” Daken said. “I didn’t have a problem with him. I didn’t give a damn about him. You were the one I wanted to hurt.”

Bobby swallowed, gritted his teeth and looked back at Daken with a glare. “And so you think that not killing someone is the same as saving their life?”

“No, but I think that he wouldn’t have survived a year of being a super hero’s damsel in distress,” Daken said, looking calmly back at him. “I’m sure you said some quick line to him about it being dangerous to love a mutant. But he couldn’t understand that. You knew he couldn’t understand it, but you chose to put him in the line of fire anyway. I made him understand.”

“... You are a real piece of work,” Bobby whispered.

“Did my father ever happen to mention to you how I was born?”

Bobby’s brow pinched in confusion at the non sequitur. “What?”

“I was cut out of my mother’s belly a few minutes after her throat was slit,” Daken said in a low, cold voice, holding Bobby’s eyes. “She died because she married someone she shouldn’t have. Because my father selfishly chose to bring her into a world she couldn’t possibly survive. Because he thought he deserved some peace and happiness.” Daken took a slow sip of his coffee, continuing to maintain eye-contact the whole time. “The world doesn’t care what you deserve, Drake.”

Bobby looked down at the table for a few minutes, unable to meet his eyes anymore. Finally he said, “I’m sorry for what happened to your mother, but what you did wasn’t okay.”

“I never said it was ‘okay’,” Daken replied, and Bobby could hear the last two syllables distorted slightly by the coffee cup nearing, then a swallow. “I’m sure ‘sick’ or ‘twisted’ would be better adjectives... But I’m also sure that he is going to live much longer because of it. It’s not about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, it’s about getting the job done.”

“Right and wrong matter,” Bobby said sharply, looking back up.
“Do they? I’ve never seen much evidence of that,” Daken shrugged and tilted his cup back, finishing off the coffee. “Maybe the problem is that nobody ever really agrees what those words mean... Or maybe it’s that they don’t mean anything at all.”

“They matter,” Bobby said again.

“Maybe they do,” Daken said, pushing out his chair and standing up. “And maybe someday you’ll convince me of that, but for now I have chores to see to.”

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As he strolled across the park, Daken thumbed a text message into his phone.

Are you home?

After a minute, the phone chirped with a response.

That is a very deep and textured question I am not sure I can fully answer at this stage in my life

Daken rolled his eyes and thumbed back.

Are you at your wife’s house?

Yes

Coming over. Need to talk to you.

He slipped the phone back into his pocket while he finished his journey at a leisurely pace and pulled it out again as he was crossing fifth, to send another text saying he had arrived. He didn’t have to wait long before the gate slid back and revealed Remy waiting on the other side. He cast Daken a quick grin. “I’m making lunch. You stay a spell, yes?”

“Isn’t it a bit early?” Daken asked as he stepped through and the gate rolled closed behind him.

“It’s gotta simmer, of course,” Remy replied with a shrug, turning to walk as Daken moved beside him.

“So you’re a kept man now, hm?” Daken smirked at him.

“Eh, ma colombe is a busy women. She appreciate a little good gumbo and pampering,” Remy shrugged.

“‘Good gumbo’ seems a bit of an oxymoron,” Daken noted.

“Well now you are disinvited,” Remy said with a pout.

“Everything in the fridge thrown into one big pot. It’s a bit like pig-slop, isn’t it?” Daken said innocently, tilting his head to the side.

Remy stopped walking and pointed back at the gate. “Dat’s it. Get out.”

“I’m sure you make the best pig-slog, Gambit,” Daken said sweetly.

“Nah, can’t quite get it up to Granny LeBeau’s standards,” Remy sighed dramatically.

“Well, I’m sure it’ll be the best gumbo I’ve ever tasted.”
“You ain’t never even tried it, have you?” Remy demanded, glaring at him. “Insulting the art of my people wit’out even so much as tasting it’s perfection? You, sir, can go to hell.”

Daken chuckled. “I will stay and eat your repurposed leftovers with an open mind,” he promised.

“Nuh’uh, ain’t none for you no more,” Remy said, crossing his arms and sticking out his chin.

Daken pulled the front door open and the mansion security system let him, apparently satisfied with Remy’s proximity. They walked in together and Remy lead the way through to the back side of the ground floor, ever closer to the smell of spices, a variety of meats, onion and sassafras. Remy went immediately to the stove, once they’d entered the spacious kitchen, and stirred a massive pot sitting atop it before setting the spoon to the side and turning back to Daken.

“So what you need to talk about?” he asked.

“I am a parent as of Wednesday,” Daken told him.

Remy’s eyes widened in surprise. “Who’d you knock up?”

“I adopted,” Daken replied flatly.

“Well dat sound far less likely,” Remy said, frowning and tilting his head. “Is dis de kid you keep walking off wit’? Are you just trying t’ get around de kidnapping thing? Dat is... Dat is not an okay response, Daken.”

“It is him, and it’s not about that,” Daken retorted, glaring a little. “Nobody’s ever wanted him. He needed to know somebody wanted him.”

Remy’s expression softened as his eyes scanned over Daken for a moment, then his lips pulled into a smile. “Damn, dat kid has really did a number on you.”

“Laugh it up,” Daken sighed, rolling his eyes. “But now I find myself with certain parental responsibilities to see to... I’ve made an appointment with She-Lawyer to write my will next week.”

“Wow. You diving right in wit’ de responsible,” Remy noted.

“If I get killed, I want you to take custody.”

Remy went completely silent, eyes widening and mouth dropping open slightly.

“He’s fifteen now, even if I died next week, it would only be a three-year commitment,” Daken said calmly. “You’ll be looking after those cats five times as long. And you don’t have to feed him, you can leave him at the school. He’ll be inheriting a quarter of my assets in trust and receiving an allowance from the interest that should cover his tuition and expenses. All you have to do is sign off on his medical and legal needs... And visit every so often to tell him he matters.”

“Dat is... Dat is very flattering... dat you want me for dis,” Remy whispered, still staring in disbelief. “I mean, surely I’m not...”

“Laura has her hands full with Gabby, and she’s really too young for even that much. I’m not going to burden her any more than she’s already chosen to burden herself,” Daken shook his head. “And what am I going to do, give him to Logan?”

Remy winced and chuckled.
“I don’t need you to take care of him, I just need to know that I’m leaving somebody I can trust in charge of his affairs,” Daken said.

“... I am deeply honored,” Remy said quietly, glancing down. He bit his lip for a moment, swallowing. “I hope, from de bottom of my heart, dat it should not ever come to dat, but if it did... I would not let you down.”

“Thank you.”

“And you have earned back de right to eat my gumbo,” Remy added, looking back up. “But only after you go down to de garage and talk to Johnny.”

Daken took a deep breath, closing his eyes, and then nodded. “... Okay.”

“And I should probably meet dis kid at some point. But we work dat out at lunch. You go,” Remy gave Daken a wave off.

Daken left the kitchen wondering if there were any other residents of the building who would have let him wander around unescorted. Well, maybe one. “Mansion, do you have a talking AI interface?” Daken called as he walked.

“Affirmative,” a synthesized voice, and a surprisingly clunky and archaic one, answered.

“Is Johnny in the garage?” Daken asked.

“Affirmative.”

“How do I get there?”

“In twelve feet, take a right,” the voice said. Daken followed the AI’s instructions as he made his way down to a sub-level and emerged into the smells of a machine shop as much as a garage. “You have arrived at your destination,” the voice announced.

Johnny, who was sitting at a workbench and had been fussing over an engine, looked up, spotted Daken and froze for a moment, looking like a cornered deer. “... Hi,” he said softly, putting down his tools and getting off the stool.

“So you told Drake that we had a fight?” Daken asked in a neutral voice, watching him.

Johnny froze and paled slightly. “I- I mentioned that you were mad at both of us when I went over there to kick his ass,” he said.

Daken raised an eyebrow. “You kicked his ass?” he asked.

“Well, maybe the opposite, if we’re being literal. I punched his idiot face,” Johnny corrected himself.

“Really? Right in the face?” Daken asked, the corner of his lips curling into a grin.

“He called you a rapist. He’s lucky I stopped there,” Johnny gave a slight shrug, glancing to the side.

“... I’m not angry at you,” Daken said, quieter.

Johnny looked back up, brow drawn in and smelling of nervous hope smeared with engine grease. “... Good. You wanna sit? Talk?” he asked.
“Yeah,” Daken nodded.

“Cool.” Johnny picked up a rag off the workbench and wiped his hands, then gave a wave and walked over to the restored Sunliner sitting with its top down along one wall. He climbed over the side, into the backseat, and Daken followed. “How are you?” Johnny asked quietly as they settled next to each other.

“... I don’t know,” Daken said and closed his eyes for a moment, biting his lip.

“Did something happen?” Johnny asked, worry painting his voice.

“Nothing and everything.” Daken shook his head and slid himself sideways on the seat so he could lean against Johnny. He put his head on Johnny’s shoulder. “I spent most of my life being told what to do, what to believe, what to want, never having a choice... But now it feels like choices are just mistakes that haven’t crashed down on me yet. It’s so much easier to never think... Never be given the opportunity to make the mistake.”

“Easier isn’t the same as better,” Johnny whispered, sliding an arm between Daken’s back and the seat.

“I know,” Daken murmured, closing his eyes. “But I have a baited hook dangling in front of me and not much confidence in my self-control.”

“Can we back off the metaphors for a sec? You’re losing me,” Johnny said, cheek against Daken’s forehead.

“Drake,” Daken said and pursed his lips for a moment, taking a faltering breath through his nose. “He’s trying to be nice to me now. He’s not very good at it, but he’s obviously trying... And he smells like desire and frustration.”

“... And you want him... to want you?” Johnny asked, his voice pinched. Too jealous to be resigned, to resigned to be jealous.

“I’m not Cheap Trick,” Daken retorted, and felt Johnny relax slightly and give an amused huff. “... I don’t know. I’m not sure if I do or if I’m just reacting,” he said, a little whine coming into his voice. “After what he did to me... I’m scared.”

“You’re scared he’s going to hurt you again?” Johnny asked.

“I’m scared I want him to,” Daken corrected.

“Oh- Oh no.” Johnny twisted, putting his other arm around Daken and squeezing him. “No no no, Daken, no,” he whispered.

“Don’t pretend you can’t understand it,” Daken mumbled into his shoulder.

“I know. I know.” Johnny kissed his head and pet his back. “But you can’t do that to yourself.”

“You would,” Daken pointed out quietly. “You want to right now.”

“No.”

“You’re lying to yourself and you’re lying to me,” Daken hissed. “I’d tear you apart, and that’s what you want.”

“No you wouldn’t. That’s not-- that’s not why--” Johnny whimpered. “You wouldn’t hurt me.”
“I did.”

“That was before, it doesn’t count,” Johnny shook his head slightly, chin brushing Daken’s ear.

“I shot you,” Daken growled.

“You were confused,” Johnny said.

“I knew what I was doing.”

“But you didn’t know why.”

“I had a plan, Johnny,” Daken snapped, torn between the urge to pull away or cuddle closer. “A plan which worked perfectly.”

“Having a plan isn’t the same as knowing why you’re doing something,” Johnny whispered.

Daken’s breath shuddered and he noticed that he was trembling.

“It’s okay to cry,” Johnny said.

“I’m not going to cry,” Daken muttered next to his collarbone.

“It’d be okay. If you need to, you shouldn’t fight it.” Johnny ran his hand through Daken’s hair.

“... You were an accident,” Daken said, voice squeezing past a lump in his throat. “I didn’t plan for you to happen, it just did... But every time I choose someone for myself... I always choose people who are going to shred me... Part of me wants him so badly, but is it the same part of me that chose the others?”

“I don’t know,” Johnny said in a small voice. “I’m really... really not any better at making that call than you.”

“Unless Rogue tells you to,” Daken growled.

“She didn’t tell me to do anything,” Johnny protested. “She just listened while I talked myself through it.”

“I just... I don’t--”

“I love you.”

Daken’s breath caught and everything inside of him hurt.

“I’m sorry!” Johnny whispered, panic in his voice and pulse. “I’m sorry I’m sorry I know I’m not being fair I’m sorry!”

Daken pulled himself away gently. “… Gambit’s making lunch,” he said, looking away as he pushed himself up and climbed out of the Sunliner. “Hungry?”

“... I feel pretty nauseous right now, honestly,” Johnny replied, and Daken could hear him crawling out of the seat behind him. “But, hey, why not.”

Chapter End Notes
Why is Remy in Avengers Mansion? Well, I started writing this fic when the previous run of Avengers was still going, and in chapter three I set up that Rogue and Johnny were both still living there (because at the time I was writing, they *were* in the comics!) and now I guess Unity Squad just disintegrated. Pietro got zapped to elseworlds and half the team was looking for him, but they didn't actually leave the mansion, so... I'm not sure anybody's going to write me satisfying a reason the teams broken up (other than the meta-reason that the publication lineup has switched.) But, anyway, meh, I'd already done my establishing shots. And like with Blue-team this is clearly a divergent timeline at this point. So for my purposes, Rogue comes back after the wedding/honeymoon and Remy wanders in and out.

The mansion's AI voice interface is HERBIE. Johnny wanted it and it was his money.
Daken bitches at Logan for a while.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings:
- Reference to past underage
- Reference to conditioning for self-exploitation

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Kitty tells me I got a new grandkid,” Logan said by way of greeting as he approached his son, sitting on a lawn overlooking the reservoir.

“I didn’t think you’d be back for a few more days,” Daken noted in a bored tone. “Did you have fun with the Captain?”

Logan sighed and sat down next to him. “Do you think I’m just screwin’ around out there?”

“I think you locked me in your clubhouse and then left,” Daken answered without bothering to look at him.

“Daken, the X-Men trashed one compound, but we still don’t have any clue where the source of this thing is,” Logan said.

“We still don’t have any clue’,” Daken repeated and glanced sideways at him. “So you’re saying that your little road trip didn’t even have a point then?”

Logan closed his eyes, putting aside the scathing tone of voice and dismissive wording and focusing on what Daken seemed to be mad about instead. He was upset that Logan had left. Logan wasn’t delusional enough to believe that Daken had missed him in the normal sense, but the fact that his son apparently wanted him nearby was something. Enough of something that it gave him the patience to get through this argument. “I gotta keep looking. You know that, even if you don’t want to admit it,” he said.

“So you can get revenge,” Daken pulled his knees up and rested his arms on them. “Because that’s what really matters. That’s what always matters. Just like getting revenge on the man who killed your wife was the only thing that mattered once. How is Bucky, by the way?”

“Daken, this ain’t about me, and it ain’t about you, and it ain’t about the people who have died,” Logan said, looking at him grimly. “It’s about the people who are going to die if the bastards ain’t stopped.”

Daken blinked a couple times, glancing down with a look of exaggerated confusion.

“What?”

“I’m sorry, you spat out so many ain’ts in rapid succession, I’m having a little trouble parsing what you even said,” Daken shook his head. “But I’m quite sure you didn’t answer the question.”

“What d’you mean?” Logan asked, raising an eyebrow.
“How’s Bucky?”

“... Haven’t seen him since I been back,” Logan said with a shrug. “He ain’t on this. Probably gone to ground more than usual after some business with Hydra that went down last year.”

“‘Some business with Hydra’. Has anybody ever told you you have a true talent for understatement,” Daken gave an exasperated sigh and rolled his eyes.

“Probably. I don’t keep track,” Logan shrugged. “So I want to hear about this thing with the kid.”

“I’m sure Pryde has already told you all about how I made an impulsive, irresponsible, selfish decision that will most likely have terrible consequences in the near or far future,” Daken sneered, shaking his head.

“Yeah, she did. Now I want you to tell me the truth,” Logan said.

Daken glanced at him again, raising an eyebrow. “So you don’t trust her anymore?”

“She’s stressed out, frayin’ her last wit, and you threw a curveball at her,” Logan shrugged. “You get into that kinda mood, it’s all worst case scenarios.”

Daken looked at him silently for a minute before answering. “... She never wanted him. That’s what Zach’s told me several times, and my observations, when I went to see her, supported that theory,” he explained quietly. “Either she looks younger than she is, or Zach was born when she was a teenager. Maybe she always saw him as the point when life as she knew it ended, and maybe, on some level, she always blamed him.” He sighed and shook his head, then let his gaze fall back on the reservoir. “Maybe she chose to ignore him because she was afraid that if she tried to interact, she’d end up screaming and hitting him. Or maybe she’s just cold and disinterested in general. Zach says boyfriends usually tended to leave after a few months.”

“Real sad,” Logan noted, studying him curiously. “What’s gettin’ me is how you got so attached to this kid.”

Daken scoffed, face pinching in annoyance. “The fact that you would need me to explain that shows how little you know me.”

“... You’re right, I don’t know you well enough,” Logan agreed. “I want to.”

“And I’m sure playing buddy road trip with Captain America is somehow very conducive to that goal,” Daken snapped, shooting him a brief glare before resuming his previous position.

Logan frowned slightly, considering that the argument had come back to its beginning point. Daken was a logical thinker, he wasn’t just failing to understand the importance of this, or believing that there was no chance Logan’s ties to it might help crack the thing somewhere down the line. It didn’t make sense to be arguing the same point again and again, because Logan was sure Daken understood, he was too smart to be this slow. Logan’s first instinct was that he was just being ornery, but it was assuming Daken’s goal was always a fight which had lead Logan to the most shameful decision of his life.

“Daken...” Logan said slowly, turning over a strange, impossible little thought. “Are you mad because I asked Steve to help me on this one? Are you thinkin’ it should be you out there with me?”

“I was already involved in it. I lived a damn zombie movie and got my head cracked open by these people. I’m part of this. They made me part of this. But you went to good old Captain America
instead,” Daken spat, turning to him again and no longer hiding his anger behind sarcasm. “Yes, it should have been me. But obviously you wanted more pleasant company.”

“No, that ain’t it at all,” Logan protested. He reached out, trying to put a hand on Daken’s shoulder, and got slapped away. “Daken, I made that mistake once, I’m not doin’ it again. I know damn well Africa was my fault. I always knew and just refused to admit it to myself. Chuck told me you were in a fragile place and I ignored him. Not this time.”

Daken made an exaggerated sound of frustration and slumped himself down against his raised knees. “... Do you know how boring it is to not have anyone to kill?”

“Sure I know. I gave up killin’ for a year one time. Maybe less than a year. I don’t know, it was a while,” Logan said flippantly before sobering again. “You’re here because this is where you’re safe. This is where you’re gonna heal some of the scars on the inside of you.”

Daken snorted. “Safe. There’s a relative value. Who knows if I’ll survive the next time Drake has a bad day.”

“You fightin’ with him again?” Logan asked, raising an eyebrow.

“He keeps belittling child abuse,” Daken growled.

“... He’s probably not doin’ it on purpose. He’s not always too good at thinkin’ about what he’s sayin’ ahead of the fact,” Logan said, wrinkling his nose.

“Have I mentioned that when he and Pryde when to collect Zach the first time, Drake punched him unconscious?” Daken turned his head to look at Logan again, eyes narrowed.

Logan groaned and rubbed his hands over his face. “... He’s not always good at thinkin’ about what he’s doin’ ahead of the fact either.”

“Really?” Daken hissed. “That’s what you’re going with?”

“Daken--”

“No! No. Tell me, does he have some disability I’m not aware of?” Daken demanded. “Is he missing the part of his brain that’s supposed to tell him ‘don’t do this’?”

“Just because a man’s stupid don’t mean he’s retarded,” Logan said.

“Just because a person’s ‘retarded’ doesn’t mean they’re stupid,” Daken sneered. “It’s the twenty-first century, Logan, that kind of ignorant talk just isn’t cute anymore.”

“So we’re done actually talkin’ now and you’re just gonna sass, ‘s that it?” Logan sighed.

“No, we’re not done, because you are missing the point!” Daken snapped, glaring at him. “I tell you he’s belittling child abuse, and you make an excuse for him. I tell you that he’s engaging in child abuse, and you make another excuse for him.”

“That’s not what I’m--”

“You say that he doesn’t think about the consequences of his actions? That’s because he doesn’t have to! Because for him, there are no consequences! You coddle him and childproof his world as if there’s something wrong with him,” Daken ranted, voice growing in volume bit by bit. “Well guess what. Now there is something wrong with him, and it’s because you and the rest of your frat
house have *smothered* him with the security-blanket!"

Logan stared at him for a moment, startled. “Now I can’t tell anymore if you’re mad *at* him or *for* him,” he said.

“Both!” Daken put his hands against his face for a moment and then rubbed them back over his head. “He’s utterly dyscopic because he’s apparently been treated as ‘the baby’ for as long as he’s been with the X-Men. And you may not have started it, but you just *did* it when you took his little problem with *casual abuse* in stride, because now it’s just *standard operating procedure!* The X-Men *younger* than him do it! You want to know why he’s never grown up? It’s because the X-Men have never *let* him!”

Logan was quiet for a while, giving it a couple minutes as Daken hunched himself over his knees again, apparently finished. “... You make a real solid point. Real solid. And I’m gonna try and keep it in mind from now on, ‘cause seems like a good chance you’re right.” Logan paused again, chewing on his lip for a minute before noting, “Guess you’ve spent a lot of time thinkin’ about what his problem is.”

“I’m trying to break the habit,” Daken said quietly.

“Which?” Logan asked, glancing at him.

“Thinking about him.”

Logan stared at him, startled. “... Huh.”

“What?” Daken demanded, turning his head slightly and glaring at Logan out of the side of his eye.

“Just wouldn’ta thought he was your type,” Logan replied with a shrug.

“... My ‘type’, so far as hindsight reveals, seems to be people who *hurt* me,” Daken said in a quiet voice with a raw edge. “So then he’s exactly my ‘type’.”

Logan felt sick at that. He tried putting a hand on Daken’s shoulder again, this time Daken didn’t push him away but he did tense up even more than he already was. “Daken, you’re seein’ the shrink Kitty set you up with, right? Have you talked to her about this?”

“I don’t talk to her.”

“Thought that was one of your conditions,” Logan said, frowning.

“I’m required to spend an hour in her office every week,” Daken replied. “An hour which I choose to spend staring at her in contempt.”

“God damn it, boy,” Logan sighed.

“Don’t call me that!” Daken snapped, now shrugging him off.

“I’m sorry. Sorry,” Logan said quickly. “I’m just-- You’re supposed to be here to get *better*. That was the whole point.”

“Would you tell a stranger all about your secrets and problems and feelings?” Daken shot back.

“... Nah,” Logan agreed reluctantly. “I’m just worried about you. Especially with that talk. You really think you’re hung up on Bobby because he laid you out?”
Daken was quiet for a moment, glaring down at the grass between his feet. “Could also be something to do with the deathseed,” he muttered.

“The deathseed? What would that have to do with it?”

“It responds to him. Maybe there’s some kind of residue left on him from his own near-apocalypse experience,” Daken shrugged slightly, the gesture made awkward by his crumpled position. “The first time, when the seed was awake, I felt him walk into my range… It was like a shiny fishing lure drawing me in.” He sighed and closed his eyes. “The seed doesn’t nag and whisper anymore since he shut it down, but I still feel a constant… awareness that he’s close by.”

“That’s… damn…” Logan said, frustrated and worried.

“None of that is as much of a problem as him though,” Daken said quietly. “His heart flutters every time I make eye-contact, and the smell of him sometimes…”

“He likes you?”

“I’ve been trained, since before I was even capable of feeling any urges, to respond to people who want me,” Daken said in a hollow tone. “It’s become instinct… I know that I do it, so I know to second guess myself now, but… contact is the problem. Being with the same people day after day.”

“Maybe… Maybe there’s somewhere else… I’ll--”

“You know it’s going to be the same problem anywhere I go,” Daken cut him off, but not harshly. “Maybe most people don’t notice it, but you can smell me.”

“… You ain’t got an off-switch,” Logan said quietly. “I wasn’t sure the times we met before. I noticed that the pheromones were always there, but couldn’t tell if it was a put-on.”

“It’s always there,” Daken agreed in a small voice. “I can take it out of gear and coast, but the engine stays running. Different people’s bodies may interpret ‘neutral’ in different ways. But there’s always a few… I’d avoided staying in one place more than a day or two before. Staying a stranger seemed like the best solution.”

“That ain’t no kind of solution,” Logan said.

“It’s better than getting stuck in a damned feedback loop,” Daken retorted.

“I don’t… know how to fix this,” Logan said miserably. “I wish you’d talk to somebody smarter than me.”

“I talk to Rachel,” Daken whispered.

“Well that’s a damn good start.”

“Maybe I’m just being paranoid,” Daken shrugged slightly. “Maybe it’s none of the aforementioned, and I’m just infatuated by the way he smells.”

“That’s… I could believe that, and it’s definitely better than the other things,” Logan said thoughtfully.
Daken bit his lip and grinned around the edges for a moment, gazing out at the reservoir. “Can we talk about how he smells?”

Logan let out a startled chuckle. “Might be a weird conversation to have with your father, but I get what you’re talkin’ about.”

“Have you ever smelled anything like that?” Daken asked, glancing at him.

“Not often,” Logan shrugged and shook his head. “Usually only after some kind of magical bullshit I’d just as soon we’d skipped.”

“It’s amazing,” Daken sighed. “... Obviously if you ever tell anyone I said that, I’ll deny it.”

“Obviously.”

Chapter End Notes

My nears and dears will be well familiar with my rants about the perception/treatment of peoples with disabilities, it's a routine ranting point, and I think probably most of them just smile and nod and wait for me to finish at this point. Usually when I'm metaphoring toward mental/learning disabilities (whether the word 'mental' or 'learning' is used largely depends on how severe it is) my go-to characters are Loki or Shatterstar, but in this case, the idea that got hooks into me isn't about how Bobby relates to the world around him, but rather how the writers and the other characters treat him. And it's not actually specific to peoples with disabilities, that's just where I saw this kind of thing happening a lot when I was coming up in the special-ed system, seeing kids who were treated as way more disabled than they actually were by their parents.

Bobby was still being treated, both by writers and characters, as 'the baby' up into the early X-Factor days, and it didn't even make sense. His age was recently retconned, probably to make a little more sense of that. In the original comics, Bobby started out at 15, the same age as Johnny Storm and Peter Parker (I guess Stan felt this was the lower-limit on acceptable super heroing age) but that put him only about two years younger than the rest of the O5, so it just made no kind of sense that they'd still be treating him like that some ten-ish years later. In Gold (issue 23) this spring, Guggenheim retconned Bobby's original age in X-Men issue 1 to be 12, making him now about 5 years younger than the other O5. That goes a long way toward solving the way the others act toward him, because it would have put the relationship in a very different context. They were bringing a freakin' 12 year old into battle with them, they would have developed over-protectiveness toward him that could have continued beyond the point of practical relevance. So it fixed that plot-hole, and it also fixed the plot-hole of why, in X-Factor, Bobby had apparently just gotten his bachelors and CPA when Hank already had a PHD. Well, because Hank is 5 years older than him.
“Hi!” Zach said brightly as Daken stepped into his dorm. He was sitting at the head of the bed, leaned against a mound of pillows with his computer in his lap, and wearing green star pajamas.

Daken raised an eyebrow. “Zach, it’s two o’clock.”

Zach shrugged. “It’s the weekend,” he pointed out. “You’re supposed to never change out of pajamas on the weekend.”

“I respect your belief system.” Daken rolled his eyes and strolled in to sit on the foot of the bed. “You’ll need to put on real clothes for dinner though.”

Zach perked up with interest. “Where are we going?”

“Not sure,” Daken shrugged. “Logan’s taking the girls and us out... I do believe this will be the first ‘family dinner’ ever.”

Zach bit his lip for a moment, eyebrows frowning. “I thought... I thought we don’t like him,” Zach said quietly.

“You don’t even know him, and... it’s complicated,” Daken sighed. “The things that happened to me when I was younger happened because of him, in every possible way they were because of him, but he wasn’t the one who did them,” he said, then paused, wetting his lip as he considered his wording carefully. “When he hurt me himself, much more recently, it stemmed from the same kind of self-centric tunnel vision that lead him to abandon me as an infant, but I made plenty of mistakes too, and deliberately created a situation which confused him... Now he wants to make things right, and I want things to be right, so... I’m going to let him try.”

Zach pursed his lips for a moment, looking down but not at his computer. “Okay,” he said finally.

“So we’re letting him buy us dinner tonight. He wants to meet you properly,” Daken said.

“I already met him,” Zach protested.

“You exchanged vague threats. You’ll note I used the qualifier ‘properly’, ” Daken scoffed. “Anyway, he’ll probably pick something like an Outback Steakhouse or a Red Lobster, so don’t worry about dress-level, wear whatever you like,” he said, wrinkling his nose and shrugging.

“But not pajamas,” Zach said with a grin.

“Not pajamas,” Daken agreed.

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“Drop Jonathan off with Lin and then go visit Jubilee or Idie, please. I need to have a talk with Daken,” Laura said when they arrived on campus.

“I need to talk to him too!” Gabby protested.

“He’ll be at dinner, Gabby. But I need to have a private talk with him,” Laura said, shaking her
head. “That was the point of coming early.”

“I need to have an important grownup talk with him too!” Gabby insisted, starting into angry-pout territory.

“Gabby, if we both come at him at once, he’s going to feel like we’re ganging up on him,” Laura explained. “If he gets defensive, I won’t be able to really talk to him like I need to.”

Gabby frowned unhappily and squirmed with indecision for a moment, clearly seeing Laura’s logic but not liking it. “… Okay,” she agreed.

“Thank you,” Laura said, patting her shoulder. “And stay away from Zach until we’re all together, please.”

Gabby scowled and made a rough noise in her throat.

“Please.”

“Yeah,” she nodded sulkily.

“Thank you,” Laura said again, and then started toward the stairs.

She tried Daken’s room first but received no answer and made her way to the balcony. He seemed to prefer being in the open air, but removed from the clamor of the school grounds or park. Her second guess was fruitful and Laura found her brother sitting on the faux brick with his back leaned against the building, shaded by the wall’s creeping shadow. Daken glanced up after a moment, catching her scent.

“You’re early,” he noted.

“I needed to talk to you,” Laura replied, walking over and settling herself down next to him. “Why did Gabby and I find out about the adoption from Gambit?”

Daken gave a pained sigh, setting his book aside. “… I’m sorry. I was tired because I hadn’t slept for a day, and then I was on fire.”

“You were on fire?” Laura demanded, startled. “Why?”

“Aquilla had a break.” Daken closed his eyes shook his head. “I’m sorry, I should have at least called you. I’ve just... I’ve had a bad couple days and it’s been an effort to get out of bed at all,” he muttered, voice barely above a whisper, and Laura wondered if there was anyone else he would have so openly admitted that to.

She was quiet for a moment, chewing her lip and processing that as she gazed out ahead of her, before looking back at Daken. “Was it just getting burned that upset you, or is there something else?” she asked.

“It was a bit more than a simple burn, Laura. I’m not sure if you’re familiar with the kind of heat involved in melting stone, but it’s rather a lot,” Daken shot back at her, grimacing, then he pursed his lips and looked away. “… No. It’s... complicated.”

“What is?” Laura pressed.

“… Johnny,” Daken whispered.

“Storm?” Laura asked, breathing in his melancholy. “Tell me why things with Johnny are
“Laura...” Daken gave an irritated sigh.

“Please, humor me, why are things with Johnny complicated?” Laura asked again.

Daken was quiet for a moment, brooding, before speaking again in a quiet, dark voice. “I might love him. I’m not sure. If not, then it’s the closest I’ve ever come,” he said. “... But I know that I’d take him apart. And I know that he’d let me. He’s been well trained to let his lovers kill him piece by piece.”

Laura nodded, looking at her feet, stretched out in front of her. “Why do you love him?” she asked.

Daken was quiet for a while, but Laura could tell he was debating his words rather than shutting her out. “For most of my life, I was taught that I was subhuman. Even before Romulus came back for me, racism had its say in my self-image,” he explained softly. “Although, with those people I was merely an embarrassment. In Romulus’ tender care, sometimes I was an animal, sometimes I was something less than that.” He drew his knees up and hugged them close to him. “I met Johnny a few weeks after Xavier scrambled me. My memories were mostly in the right order by then. My core conditioning was still in shambles, but a lot of the feelings attached to it... I kept telling myself I was in control, but I was running scared.”

“I can understand that,” Laura said when he paused. “It takes years and some kind of security to even begin to distance yourself from the fear.”

Daken nodded, pursing his lips and staring at the faux brick. “Johnny made me feel better... He made me feel human,” he said in a small voice.

“I see,” Laura said and drew a deep sigh. She stared straight ahead of her for a moment, then wet her lip. “A beautiful boy made me human too.”

Daken turned his head, looking at her. “Oh?”

“It was while I was with X-Force. When we were at open war with the Purifiers,” Laura said. “It was the first time Logan had been forced to spend very much time with me.”

“Forced?” Daken asked, sounding confused.

“... I am like a child of rape,” Laura said slowly; it was the first time she’d ever articulated it out loud. “He never blamed me for being created, and he wanted me to be taken care of, but he was very uncomfortable in my presence.”

“... He’s always so quick to adopt every unattended teenage girl he finds, I didn’t realize he ever had any reluctance toward you,” Daken said.

“Most unattended teenage girls he meets weren’t carved out of his flesh by people who tortured him,” Laura pointed out and closed her eyes. “He was on edge around me those first few months in X-Force, and in his anxiety said some things to me that he should not have... I interpreted one of his more questionable verbal lashouts to mean that my life had no value.” She swallowed and bit her lip for a few seconds. “When I was having a moment of particularly troublesome existential crisis, Elixir reached out to me... He has saved my life in a very literal way twice, and on this occasion, he made me human.”

“Elixir? Hmm,” Daken hummed warmly. “He smells lovely.”
“Yes,” Laura agreed with a nod. “But he never should have been there. He was conscripted to be a part of X-Force against his explicit will. He asked over and over to be let go.” Laura bit her lip and looked down at her knees, an uncomfortable heat in her eyes suddenly. “Neither of us should have been there. Cyclops and Logan were both irresponsible and immoral for putting us on that team. But for me, it simply kept me from growing. I was doing what the Facility had made me for, I was killing for my handlers... For Josh... he was not made for that... and it was killing him... I could see that it was killing him... I stood idle and watched as he died little by little.”

“Laura, you were a child,” Daken whispered.

“Yes,” Laura said and swallowed against a lump in her throat. “I could see what was happening, maybe clearer than any of the adults, but I didn’t know how to address the situation. Nobody had ever taught me to question authority... The opposite, actually.” She blinked quickly and then closed her eyes tightly, not trusting them to behave. “I could do nothing for him... He gave me my soul and I could give him nothing.”

“You liked him?”

“As you said, he smells lovely. He is objectively a very attractive person,” Laura replied with a little shrug. “But I was able to recognize very quickly that he was too good for me.”

“I hope you don’t mean to imply an attitude problem,” Daken’s voice had a slight scowl in it.

“No. I mean... morally? He was too gentle,” Laura said. “He was raised by mean, small-minded people who spent sixteen years grooming him for bigotry. But they couldn’t teach him to hate. They tried, and he tried to please them, but he couldn’t bring himself to hurt anybody... Until he watched forty-two of his classmates die in front of him... one of them was in his arms when they succumbed... and then his lover was shot through the brain four feet from where he was standing. Killed instantly... That was how he learned violence. And it is poison to him.”

“So violence is his poison, and you were built to be violence incarnate,” Daken said softly, a thoughtful lilt in his voice.

“Yes,” Laura agreed, opening her eyes and looking out at the treeline. “We spent a great deal of time together in X-Force, we were ‘the children’, and so I suppose it was natural that we gravitated toward each other, and I did notice that he was very attractive... but I put it out of mind. I could recognize how bad I was for him just as easily as I could recognize that he was attractive. And so I focused instead upon a boy who was... bossy. I was much more comfortable with bossy.”

“Huh... It always startles me how much alike we are... We’re more like each other than either of us is like Logan,” Daken murmured and then sighed. “Johnny was the weekend affair. I had a more... comfortably familiar boyfriend too.”

Laura nodded slowly. “Familiarity is comfortable for a while.”

“... You’re very different now,” Daken said softly, and Laura glanced at him. “Did you know that Elixir has been running with a genuine crusading knight for the past year?”

Laura frowned, puzzled by the description. “I didn’t.”

“Based upon what I’ve heard and seen, it’s my understanding that Elixir is potentially one of the most powerful mutants on the planet, and yet his chauffeur follows him around like an over-protective nanny,” Daken said, looking calmly back into her eyes. “You’re no longer what the Facility made you to be. You’re a protector now, and it rather seems like a protector is exactly...
what Elixir needs to get along day by day so that he can perform his miracles.”

Laura pursed her lips and looked at her feet again, turning that over in her head. “... I know that you’ve looked to me for inspiration before at times,” she said after a while. “Are you toying with the idea that if perhaps I have become ‘right’ for Elixir, that you might become one day ‘right’ for Johnny?”

There was quiet for a few moments, and Laura tasted malaise and frustration in Daken’s scent before he answered in a quiet voice. “I was conditioned five times as long as you,” he said slowly. “Logically, it will take me five times as long to be in a place where I could even consider trusting myself with someone like him. And I hope that he would have found happiness sooner than that.”

“I don’t think it’s valid to view this sort of thing in mathematical terms,” Laura said and bit her lip for a moment. “But... yes, it would be a poor choice to make that your goal... The person you should want to get better for is yourself.”

Daken sighed softly. “I’m sure that’s very ‘healthy’ and all, but is it necessarily wrong to find motivation in affection?” he asked. “If I want to be a good brother and a good parent, is that somehow less valid or ‘healthy’ than wanting to get well for my own sake?”

“... I don’t know,” Laura admitted. “Maybe that’s a point that could be argued, but I’m not even sure if it would be a psychological argument or a philosophical argument... I don’t see harm in it though.”

“Well then, I am going to continue to be inspired by you, whether you make a move on that living idol or not, and I refuse to hear any complaints about it,” Daken said.

Laura smiled and scooted herself over a little to lean against him.

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Gabby had ignored Zach’s presence through the entire drive to Harlem, and so Zach had ignored her presence as well. Obviously the evening was off to a fantastic start. They continued to ignore each other as everybody exited the Uber, and Daken’s eyes drifted over the exterior décor and signage. “And it’s a tavern. Naturally,” he noted.

“They got food, and kids are allowed in,” Logan shrugged.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Laura said, jabbing two fingers into Daken’s side.

After they’d settled into the half-booth and perused the menus for a few minutes, Logan started attempting to strike up a conversation with Zach. “So, Kid, what’s your deal?” he asked.

Zach looked up from his menu, glanced sideways at Daken momentarily and then back across the table at Logan. “... I’m a power amplifier,” he said.

“Yeah, I got that memo. I mean what are you about? What do you like?” Logan clarified.

Zach shrugged. “Video games.” He paused for a moment, sucking in his lip and chewing on it, then tried for a longer sentence. “My uncle got me an X-Box a few years ago. He bought it off one of his buddies and gave it to me for Christmas. That seemed like kind of a big deal back then, because there was never really any money for good stuff. I found an old TV somebody was throwing out and put it in my room, and Mom-- Marcia let me play as much as I wanted as long as I wasn’t bugging her... So that’s what I did.” He shrugged again.
“You just... played video games,” Logan repeated, frowning slightly, brow wrinkled.

“Yeah,” Zach looked back down at his menu, shoulders tensing up a little. “It’s not like anybody wanted to hang out with me.”

Daken laid a hand between his shoulder blades. “You like swimming too, right?” he said. “Or cliff-diving, like at the waterfall in Madripoor?”

“Yes!” Zach said, looking up at Daken with a bright grin. “That was the best!”

“Cliff-diving?” Gabby demanded with a little whine in her voice, but was shushed by Laura.

“And Daken taught me how to punch guys bigger than me and how to fight a crowd so that they’re mostly fighting themselves!” Zach said excitedly as Gabby scowled and pouted.

“Those are both valuable life skills,” Logan said with a nod and a smirk.

“Zach is a very quick study,” Daken said.

“HE’S ANNOYING AND STUPID!” Gabby shouted, jumping to her feet.

“Gabby!” Laura snapped, even as Gabby was spinning around and running for the door. Laura started to get up.

“I’ll talk to her,” Daken said, and then squeezed Zach’s shoulder. “I’ll be back. Order me the skirt steak, please.”

“Okay,” Zach agreed as Daken got up and followed Gabby.

Outside, he paused and inhaled deeply, then followed Gabby’s scent around the block and into an unpaved alley with a broken chain-link gate failing to block it. “Gabby,” he called as he neared the sounds of sniffing.

“Go away! You’re a jerk, and I’m mad at you!” Gabby declared. She was crouched against the brick of a townhouse, knees hugged against her chest.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come over and talk to you about Zach,” Daken said, walking over to her slowly and crouching down. “I should have. I... I had some problems at the school. I’m sorry.”

“No! You shouldn’t have come told me because you shouldn’t have done it!” Gabby protested with a sob. “Zach’s stupid and rude and scowly and you’re my brother and I shouldn’t have to share you with him!”

Daken shifted around to sit down next to her and put an arm around Gabby as she continued to cry. “Gabby, you don’t have to share your brother with Zach because I’m not his brother. I’m his parent now, and that’s different.”

“Nuh-uh! It’s just as bad!” Gabby shook her head fiercely. “And- And it’s our first ever family dinner and he’s here and it’s not fair! I don’t like him! He acts like such a jerk!”

“Gabby, the reason Zach’s antisocial is because he never had anyone before,” Daken explained calmly. “You always had sisters, but Zach didn’t have any siblings and he didn’t have friends and he had a bad mother.”

“I don’t like him though,” Gabby whined.
“You don’t have to like him right away,” Daken said softly. “And if you never like him, that’s okay, some people just don’t get along and it’s no one’s fault.”

Gabby sniffled and rubbed at her eyes. “It’s not fair.”

“You and I can still do things just us sometimes,” Daken reassured her. “It’s the same as when we do something just us and Laura doesn’t come along. Just because we’re a family doesn’t mean we always have to travel in a homogeneous mass.”

Gabby took a shuddering breath. “Can- Can we have a princess day?” she asked.

“We absolutely can. We’ll go dress-shopping, then we’ll go to the salon, and I’ll find us a teahouse that does a full English high-tea set up,” Daken said and kissed the top of her head.

“And there will be cakes so small you pick them up with two fingers?” Gabby asked with a hiccup.

“The tiniest cakes and sandwiches,” Daken agreed.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sick and drowsy today as I do my final in situ edit, so I can't be bothered to contemplate if there was anything in this chapter I wanted to digress on or explain. Oh well.
Monday on the first day of summer term, in addition to the morning club he’d become accustomed to, Daken had run a more intensive session before lunch. Many of the older students showed aptitude. The ones who had lived through M-Day to become child-soldiers. The skills would serve them well, without question, but the fact that all those child-soldiers had been the first to sign up for more combat training was problematic. And for some reason, Daken was the only one who seemed to think so.

His thoughts kept circling back to it out of the failure to better occupy them as he waited, leaning against the wall beside a classroom door in the hallway. Finally the intercom system played a faux bell sound and the door opened. Students started flowing out of the room and Daken reached out without looking to grab the arm of one as he passed.

“Hey! What-- Oh,” Deeds gave him an unsure, intimidated look. He had an unfortunate tendency toward ‘prey’ body-language.

“Your classes finish at one tomorrow?” Daken asked, letting Deeds go as he stepped out of the way of the door.

“Yeah?”

“Good. Tuesdays and Thursdays at a quarter after then,” Daken said.

“O-Okay,” Deeds nodded, failing to make eye-contact.

“Bring a friend who can make the schedule.”

“A friend?” Deeds looked up at him again briefly, confusion written on his face.

“We’re training pheromone use. You can’t learn that without somebody there to respond to you, and I’m immune,” Daken explained.

“Oh. Right. Yeah,” Deeds nodded. “I can--”

“Not the boyfriend,” Daken said.

“But--”

“Somebody three to six inches shorter than you,” Daken said firmly, watching Deeds confused frown grow deeper. “No horns or tall cranial ridges or anything. You’ll need to be able to pass your arm quickly and easily over their head.”


“Somebody thin or otherwise light weight,” Daken added. “And no wings.”

“Why?”

“A quarter after one in room 2E. Somebody three to six inches shorter than you, light weight with no major head-protrusions or wings. Show up alone and I’ll give you detention,” Daken listed off

“No?”

“That’s-- You can’t--”

“Actually I can, and you are talking back to a teacher,” Daken pointed out. “Congratulations on having a spine, but you’re also being remarkably uncooperative. These lessons are meant to be for your benefit.”

“I’m not-- Wait, I’m sorry. You just startled me,” Deeds flustered. “I’ll- I’ll find somebody.”

“Good. Tomorrow, quarter after one,” Daken said again and then turned and strode down the hall.

“Okay! See you then!” Deeds called awkwardly after him.

“I still think you should visit,” Rachel said, frowning over the top of her Kindle. “You could stay in a hotel in town so that you’d have a quiet place to hole up if you get overwhelmed.”

“That would be rather rude, don’t you think? Megan would certainly be hurt, and Brian would probably throw a tantrum,” Betsy sighed, letting her magazine drop on her chest.

“If we’re talking about rude, I’d like to point out that failing to meet your niece before her first birthday would probably be considered rude,” Rachel said, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

“Yes, but I don’t have to hear tantrums when there’s an ocean between us,” Betsy shrugged.

Before Rachel could decide on an answer to that fairly legitimate statement, the door of the reading room opened and Daken walked in. “Rachel, do you know how to waltz?” he asked, not bothering with a greeting.

Rachel turned slightly and raised an eyebrow at him. “I grew up in a dystopian hellscape,” she said.

“Yes but you’ve been in this dystopia for a while now,” Daken pointed out with a shrug. “Can you learn it from my mind?”

“Can I navigate the barbed-wire and machine-gun fire and make my way through the minefield of your head to search for the tiny grain of sand that is your knowledge of nineteenth century ballroom dancing?” Rachel gave him a flat look.

“So that’s a ‘no’,” Daken said.

“Ask Monet,” Rachel suggested.

“Obviously she’s the first person I asked,” Daken sighed, shaking his head. “Dani and Reyes are a no, Jubilee just laughed, and I think it would be a bit awkward to ask Aquilla, but she probably doesn’t know any dances more recent than the first century anyway.”

“I’m the last person you asked?” Rachel demanded.

“You grew up in a dystopian hellscape!”
“Fine,” Rachel snorted, slumping back in her chair.

“I know how to waltz,” Betsy said, sitting up a little to peer over the back of the couch at him.

“Good for you, Braddock,” Daken replied and then turned and left.

“... Well speaking of rude,” Betsy sighed, after a few moments of quiet, and flopped herself back down. “What was that waltzing business all about anyway?”

“I have no idea,” Rachel shrugged.

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Daken had moved all of the desks to the edges of the room and sat cross-legged on top of one, waiting, when the classroom door opened and Deeds walked in with a nervous, hesitant air. That would definitely need work. He was followed by a girl who indeed met the requirements given and Daken hopped down off the desk and walked to the center of the room. “Shall we get started then?” he asked.

“Why are the desks…” Deed’s wondered, looking around in confusion.

“Hi, I’m Hope. Not the Hope, I mean--”

“You’ve been coming to the morning session for three weeks, Abbott, I know who you are,” Daken gave the girl a nod. “Will you be able to make Tuesdays and Thursdays?”

“I- I think, maybe?” Abbott said with a little shrug. “I’m not actually sure what we’re doing?”

“You’re learning to waltz,” Daken replied.

“Oh! Well… neat. Um, yeah, I think I can make it,” Abbott said.

“Now--”

“Waltz?” Deeds demanded. His habit of interrupting was both promising and problematic by equal measure. “You’re supposed to be teaching me to use my powers.”

“Correct,” Daken agreed.

“Then why are you just teaching me to waltz?”

“I’m not just teaching you to waltz,” Daken corrected. “I’m teaching you to lead a waltz.”

“But--” Deeds started and then turned to look over his shoulder when the door opened behind him. Braddock stepped into the room and closed the door softly behind her. “Am I late?” she asked.

“It’s quite difficult to be late for a function you weren’t invited to,” Daken replied and the gestured broadly to her. “Deeds, Abbott, have you met Lady Braddock?”

“Er, yes.”

“Uhuh.”

“Did you know that she murdered her brother in an act of preemptive ‘justice’?” he asked and saw Braddock’s eyes widen in shock. “Decided she was going to save the world from something he
hadn’t done yet? No? You never heard that? Did I mention he was mentally ill?”

“You--” Braddock started furiously, a flush rising in her cheeks.

“After which she convinced my father that it was his responsibility to do the same to me,” Daken cut her off and she went silent, staring. “Now then, Deeds, you are going to learn to lead a dance, to direct your partner through the motions, to make her go where you want to go, and turn at the speed you want her to turn, without saying a word. You are learning to control someone with your body so subtly they don’t even notice they’re being guided.”

“I don’t want that,” Deeds protested.

Daken silently raised an eyebrow at him.

“I don’t want to control people,” Deeds clarified.

“Do you want to develop an ability control your powers?” Daken asked. “Perhaps you’d prefer they controlled you? Perhaps you’d prefer to doubt the sincerity of every relationship you ever have. Because if you can’t control yourself, then how can you know that you’re not controlling others?”

Deed’s eyes widened and he paled slightly.

“Now then, today you’ll be learning and practicing the basic box-step. We can start getting fancier on Thursday,” Daken said. “Braddock, why are you still here?”

“... Because you needed a waltz partner,” Braddock said quietly.

Daken stared at her for a few seconds and then gave a brushing wave toward Deeds and Abbott. “Stand to the side a bit please, Braddock and I are going to demonstrate,” he said and then held his left hand out to Braddock as the students moved out of the way. Braddock walked toward him with forced and determined calm and took his hand, then waited with two steps left between them. Daken turned his attention back toward the students. “The early form of the waltz moved from rural hoedowns to the upper-crust ballrooms of Austria in the seventeenth century. When it made it’s high-society debut, it was considered a lude and provocative act due to the proximity at which the partners danced relative to each other,” he said and then pulled Braddock into him, wrapping his other arm around her waist.

“It is performed in three-four time, meaning you will be counting one-two-three-one-two-three as you move,” he continued, holding position for a moment longer, Braddock against his chest. "There are six steps. Both dancers follow the same steps, but the lead begins on step one and the follow begins on step four. Step one is a forward step of the right foot, step four is a backward step of the left. You dip slightly as you move.” He took the step and Braddock moved with him, then paused precariously there.

“Step two and five move the other foot parallel to the first but with a step’s space between,” Daken continued and Braddock matched him. “Step three and six slide the original foot sideways, moving the feet together. You are shifting back and forth, from foot to foot, with each beat,” he explained. “In the second half of the step, you are reversing movement, now the lead goes backwards and to the left while the follow goes forwards and to the right.” Daken lead Braddock through the second half of the step with the same slow deliberation, keeping his eyes and attention on Deeds and Abbott. “The box-step is the foundation of the waltz, the dance is a continuous repetition of this step with movement added on top of it.”
He started slowly waltzing with Braddock in place for a few cycles before beginning to turn her around the floor. “One dances in time to the beat of the music. A band may chose to play the three-four at a faster or slower tempo, but it will continue to contain the three-count. One-two-three-one-two-three-one-two-three.” He let go of Braddock’s waist, whisking her out and guiding her through a slow telemark. “When more complex movements are added, they must start on beat one and finish on three so that the box-step may be resumed without faltering. Watch again,” he instructed and started the whisk again. “One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten-eleven-twelve. You see?”

The students nodded, Deeds still looking highly skeptical, Abbott excited.

“And how did Braddock know that I wanted her to step back?” Daken asked.

“Because she’s psychic?” Deeds asked, a hint of stringency to his tone.

“Wrong.”

“I’m pretty sure she is.”

“My hand pushes gently against hers and I let go of her waist, then she allows me to pull her through to a new position,” Daken corrected. “I am using my body to communicate subtle cues that she has learned to read. Until you are both reasonably comfortable with the movements of the dance, you will have difficulty giving those cues, and Abbott will have difficulty understanding them. Practice is essential both for becoming proficient in the motions and for becoming comfortable with the rhythm.”

For the rest of the lesson Daken alternated between brief demonstrations and teaching, and correcting, Deeds and Abbott’s box-step. Whenever she wasn’t dancing, Braddock stood silently to the side, her breathing so steady it was clear she was practicing meditation techniques to keep herself calm and polite. Whenever Daken reached toward her for another short demonstration, she was instantly ready and pliable, and every time he let her go, she became less obtrusive than a mannequin. An aristocratic upbringing had taught her to be the perfect, demure lady, and the state of existential ambiguity she had apparently fallen into upon the reclamation of her original face, for which everyone was treating her like an invalid, must have her falling back on those childhood lessons. Was the double-standard, catering to her apathy and swaddling her in comfort and free board, a byproduct of gender or the fact that she had been born and raised on the right side of the tracks?

“That’s enough for today,” Daken called as they hit an hour. “On Thursday you’ll start practicing with music. Abbott, thank you for making yourself available. Braddock, thank you for your assistance.”

“Sure, no problem! This’ll be fun!” Abbott chirped with a grin as Braddock nodded stoically and walked to the door.

“You stay, Deeds,” Daken called as Deeds started to pick up his school bag off of the desk he’d left it on.

“O-Okay,” Deeds stammered, letting the bag go and watching nervously as the women drifted out of the room. “What’s next?”

“Putting the desks back in order,” Daken replied, picking one up and moving it to its previous location.
“Right,” Deeds nodded and went to pick another up.

“You’re afraid of your powers,” Daken noted.

Deeds faltered, dropping the desk a little too heavily. “Um… no?”

“From what I’ve observed since I’ve been here, they aren’t strong,” Daken said calmly, moving another desk. “Your pheromone concentration when you’re calm is about three times the upper limit for a ‘normal’ human. When you’re nervous, it’s a bit less than doubles,” he explained.

“Okay…” Deeds said, frowning slightly as he moved another desk.

“That isn’t enough to actually ‘control’ anyone,” Daken said.

Deeds was silent for a moment. His expression was blank, but Daken could smell relief and hear it in his breath. “Okay.”

“I also haven’t noticed any variation in the type of pheromones you give off. It’s possible you don’t have a range, that’s actually more common. Or at least it was before M-Day, I’m not even sure if the demographic distributions are the same in mutantkind’s renaissance,” he shrugged as he set down a desk and went for another. “What you emit is a mix of the two active pheromones which are typical to humans. The only thing that stands out to indicate they are an expression your mutation is the unusual intensity and anachronism.”

“Anachronism?” Deeds asked, frowning in confusion.

“You have baby pheromones, and as you are not a baby, that would be an anachronism,” Daken replied.

“… What are ‘baby pheromones’?”

“There are two contexts in which humans, and the majority of mammals, commonly use active, telegraphing pheromones,” Daken explained. “What do you tend to associate the word with?”

“Um… sex… stuff?” Deeds mumbled awkwardly.

“Correct,” Daken agreed. “Sexually mature mammals use pheromones to signal or provoke estrus or otherwise elicit aphrodesia. And infant mammals use pheromones to send a signal that says ‘please hold me and don’t smother me in my sleep’.”

Deeds set down the last desk and gave him a skeptical squint. “I have ‘don’t smother me in my sleep’ pheromones…”

“You have a combination of the two, the overall effect being magnetism. Calm, subtle adoration,” Daken clarified. “As with infants, it’s probably as much a defense mechanism as anything else, given the way it ramps up when you’re uneasy.”

Deeds frowned with discontent. “So I make people adore me,” he said quietly.

“You predispose them to adore you,” Daken corrected. “If you thought you could make an obnoxious cad of yourself and not get smacked, you would be in for a painful wakeup call.”

“How… How strong is it?” Deeds asked, gaze downward cast and unfocused. “How much are people predisposed to like me?”

Daken studied him for a moment, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms. “You’re fairly
attractive and naturally thin. As strong as that,” he said.

“That’s all?” Deeds asked, looking up, eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“Ask somebody who struggles with their weight if ‘that’s all’,” Daken retorted.

Deeds flushed slightly in embarrassment, looking down again. “I just-- When this started being a topic, I thought it was a big deal or something. I…”

“You got scared,” Daken supplied.

“I don’t know,” Deeds shrugged sheepishly. “I mean, do I even really need to learn if they’re not really such a big deal?”

“I’ve been here a month. I may not have an accurate read on you yet,” Daken said. “And even if you are face-value, it’s important for you to understand what you’re doing. Eventually you may be able to develop a feel of it.”

“And dancing is how I’m going to learn?”

“Dancing is going to help you contextualize. The same as yoga and tai chi are tools that help focus the mind and spirit,” Daken replied.

“So this is how you learned then?” Deeds asked.

Daken paused for a moment, composing his response. “No. I will not be teaching you the way I learned, and I would not stand idle and allow anyone else to do that to you.”

Deeds’ brow creased as he gave Daken a worried, uncertain look. “How… did you learn?”

Daken was quiet again for a few beats. “... We’ve known each other for a few hours, Deeds. We’re not that close yet,” he said.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Daken said in a sharper voice. “Stop being timid, and stop unquestioningly doing whatever you’re told.”


“One of the side-effects of your powers is that you are going to attract attention you don’t ask for or want,” Daken said. “You clearly have some difficulty with the word ‘no’ and you need to get over that.”

“I-- That’s not--”

“You had no idea what you were walking into today. You were afraid of me, don’t bother denying it, the cliché of being able to smell fear? Yes, I can do that,” Daken snapped, glaring at him. “I was rude and aggressive and you laid down like a doormat. Did you even bother talking to another teacher about your misgivings?” he demanded. “And not only did you put yourself into an uncertain situation with a person who scares you, you lead Abbott into it.”

“I--”

“Because an authority figure gave you an order and you were afraid of detention. You moron.”
“Hey!”

“Your homework is to look up and read the article ‘Behavioral Study of Obedience’ by Stanley Milgram,” Daken said.

“I-- The Milgram Experiment?” Deeds looked baffled. “I think I read that in freshman--”

“Then you’re clearly in need of a refresher,” Daken cut him off. “Read it again.”

Deeds sucked in his lip, anger in his eyes but he didn’t talk back. “Are we done?” he asked.

“See you Thursday. Same time, same room,” Daken replied.

“Fine,” Deeds said, picking up his bag and stalking out the door.

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted a song in 3/4 time for this one, but I couldn't find one that I liked better than Vogue (it's in 4/4). Oh well.

Hope Abbott is 'Trance' from New X-Men. She's been a pretty minor character, but you might remember her from the Limbo arch in Academy X, she was the one who's astral form got out of Limbo to tell the teachers what was happening.

I've been looking forward to playing with this for a while. Benjamin as a character isn't one I feel a special connection to, but I wanted to write Daken instructing somebody with pheromone powers, and Benjamin is interesting to play with because of that hesitance and malleability that has often characterized him. During the Uncanny issue with him learning to refine his shapeshifting powers, Emma kind of encouraged him to let himself be lead and shaped by the people he was working, becoming a mirror for them to see what they want. Daken is now pushing him in the opposite direction, or rather, trying to make him push back.
“Welcome to the other side!” a jovial, slightly-too-loud voice called as Bobby came off the escalator and onto the street. Bobby grinned and let out a chuckle; even dressed like a more or less ‘normal person’ this guy could not blend in to save his life. So much for low-profile, Bobby may as well have come across the East River on ice slides.

“From a guy who spends way too much time dead, that greeting comes off a little creepy,” he noted, stepping out of the path of people trying to get on or off an escalator.

“Nonsense. I spend far less time dead than most people who die,” Hercules countered with a smirk. “So, now that your desire to ‘get the hell away from X drama’ has been satisfied, are there any particular sights in Queens that strike your fancy?”

“I have no idea,” Bobby shrugged, shaking his head. “Sightseeing wasn’t my plan, just getting away from the school, from the bullshit, from anything preceded by an X for a few hours...” he sighed. Fridays he didn’t have any classes for the summer, leaving him to start his weekend early while the worst of the crowds would still be locked in their office buildings. “And hanging out with a buddy I basically never see anymore for some reason.”

“Onward to coffee then!” Hercules declared dramatically and Bobby laughed. Definitely shouldn’t have bothered with the subway.

Soon they were settled in a cafe near the water and catching up. Odd, because they were supposed to have done this in LA. But Bobby had been too distracted by his first out crush, which seemed so much stupider in retrospect because that was all it felt like now. A couple weeks of giddiness, feeling like a teenager, and the angst afterwards hadn’t been focused on the loss itself, but rather on the unfairness of it. Because Bobby hadn’t been in love with Judah, he’d been in love with the idea of him. And not only had he wound himself up over an idea superimposed on the first convenient target, he’d ignored and even snapped at the friends who were more than just ideas to him.

And if he hadn’t been so wrapped up in his little fantasy world on that trip, he probably would have noticed how different Hercules was. It’s not as if he’d been constantly drunk back in the day or anything, but talking to him now, it seemed like sobriety was a lot more than simply not being drunk. If Bobby had asked the Hercules he remembered ‘so what have you been up to’, he would have expected to be regaled by hours of big-fish stories about how great the demigod was. Self-aggrandizement to cover self-loathing, how the hell had Bobby never noticed that? Instead it seemed like every second thing out of Hercules’s mouth was something about how awesome and adorable the Baby-Champions were, citing their social media posts and inside news from Baby-Hulk.

“You have become your biggest fanboy’s biggest fanboy,” Bobby noted with a grin.

“Ha! Well spotted!” Hercules agreed with a wide grin. “It never gets old, Bobby, never, watching these youths reach out and take hold of their potential. All the hours I spent worrying that the scars on his soul would lead Amadeus down the wrong path, that I hadn’t the skill or the virtue to guide him right... And the worry was for nothing. He is well on his way to being a far better man and hero than his mentors.”
“You’re being too hard on yourself, Herc. That kind of talk doesn’t help anything, y’know,” Bobby said. “And you don’t deserve it. You’re a great hero and a great guy.”

Hercules smiled warmly at him. “You have grown up well, Bobby,” he said. “Has anybody told you that recently? Has anybody told you they’re proud of you? I am. I can take little credit in it, but I am proud just the same.”

Bobby flushed in pleased embarrassment. “... Thanks,” he mumbled, looking down.

“And you a teacher, you must be well familiar with this feeling now,” Hercules noted. “So tell me of the scamps.”

“Nng, there’s so many,” Bobby groaned, rubbing his hands over his face. “I feel like I don’t connect with any of them because I’m just in sensory overload with it. I mean, back with X-Factor, I loved those kids, they were amazing, but now there’s so many I can barely keep track of their names. And- And I am screwing up because of that... Kitty’s got a new counselor coming in next week because we’ve been screwing up so bad, with the depressed kids and the angry kids just falling through the cracks.”

“That is a difficult position to be in,” Hercules nodded grimly. “Gone are the days when every child was afforded a mentor, as now all the would-be mentors find themselves cloistered in offices. A shame.”

“I wish I could claim I was doing my best, but I’m not. I’ve let my own stress get in the way,” Bobby sighed, shaking his head and leaning his elbows on the table. “I’m distracted, but I also just... make bad decisions without thinking about it sometimes. Too much.”

“That’s hardly new for you,” Hercules pointed out with a sardonic smirk.

“Hitting a kid is,” Bobby said softly.

Hercules’ eyebrows raised. “Is there some context to go with that?”

“I guess. His powers were out of control, and his powers are to screw with other people’s powers, so that was making Kitty and me useless, and a mob of angry villagers wanted to kill us all,” Bobby explained. “So I knocked him out to shut him down.”

Hercules tilted his head, considering that. “I follow your logic. It’s a questionable action, but also a desperate one. Did you explain this to the child?”

“... I hardly said two words to him after that,” Bobby said softly, looking down at the table. “I didn’t apologize. I didn’t even think to, because I was too caught up in my own dumb stuff... Making him easy damn prey when Daken found him.”

“Daken? Logan’s son?” Hercules asked, raising an eyebrow. “He’s at the school now, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, now, this was months ago though,” Bobby clarified, shaking his head. “And apparently he doesn’t see any problem with just claiming any unattended teenager and walking off with him. So.” Bobby let out an irritated snort.

“Daken? Logan’s son?” Hercules asked, raising an eyebrow. “He’s at the school now, isn’t he?”

“Which is... considered uncouth?” Hercules asked, frowning uncomfortably.

“First off, yes Herc, snatching random, unattended teenagers is normally considered very ‘uncouth’,’” Bobby groaned, rolling his eyes. “Some people who do it, in fact, I’m gonna say the vast majority, are not as cool and noble as you. And in this case, Daken head-hunted him for his
powers, because... well, because he was sick and... he didn’t think anybody would help him without being duped into it.”

“That’s... hm,” Hercules tilted his head and continued to frown thoughtfully.

“And I-- So I caught up and took him down hard. I... I hit him as if he was nigh-indestructible instead of just nigh-unkillable, which... which is an important distinction that I... forgot to make,” Bobby said, fading into a mutter and looking down at the table. “I... made him bleed... a lot. But I didn’t know about him being sick at the time, and- and I gotta give you some more context again here,” Bobby pleaded, fidgeting with his cup and not looking up. “Daken’s been involved in a student kidnapping before. Evan’s pretty insistent now that Sabertooth was really behind it, and Daken was sort of a hired frontman playing a role, but, I mean, that doesn’t make it any less scary to have a missing kid and find out he’s involved.”

“Mm. A man of his skills who sells those skills to villains like Sabertooth and Osborn--”

“Actually, uh, that- that time he was actually spying on Osborn for the Fantastic Four... That’s... another thing I found out a lot later,” Bobby said and bit his lip. “He’s totally friends with Johnny Storm.”

“HA!” Hercules barked. “Oh that is-- that is funny and far more encouraging!”

Bobby sighed and sat back in his chair. “Yeah, plenty of information that maybe would have been good to know years ago.”

“I confess, the only time I shared a battlefield with the man I was too distracted to pay him any attention,” Hercules said with a shrug. “I noticed he had a sacred mantle, but had no time to get a close look, even to see to whom he belonged.”

Bobby frowned, baffled by the statement. “Mantle?” he asked.

“Ah, a thing you would not know of, I apologize,” Hercules shook his head. “Visible only to a god or one with significant mystical training. It is... a banner. Displaying the patronage of a divinity’s attendant. Daken’s was quite vivid, like that of high clergy to a skyfather.”

Bobby stared at him, a creeping feeling of dread mixed with nausea in the pit of his stomach. “... Are you saying that Daken has a god’s name branded on him?” he asked quietly.

Hercules bit his lip and tilted his head to the side, obviously considering the question and looking uncomfortable. “... Well, it takes a great and prolonged supplication to achieve a sacred mantle. To say a ‘brand’... It is not simply a rancher branding cattle. For most divine patrons, a devotee would have a long apprenticeship followed by decades of worship to be so anointed. Do you happen to know who his patron is?”

Bobby dropped his gaze to the table. Just as he felt the bile starting to rise in his throat, his stomach iced up reflexively and the numbness spread upward through his chest, stilling his heart and relieving him of that sick pounding in his ears. “... Romulus,” he said softly, the cold air from his iced-over lungs chilling his still-flesh lips.

“... Oh,” Hercules said, his voice leaden.

Bobby glanced up to find Hercules with a disturbingly blank expression, staring into space. “‘Oh’?”

“... Emperor Theodosius gutted that order. With prejudice,” Hercules said quietly. “He had all
those of Romulus’s temple who refused to renounce his name executed. The few who did renounce him were isolated on an island until they passed... to prevent any possibility of their order ever being revived.” He drew a deep breath and sighed it out through his nose. “But I suppose Romulus was not the sort of god to simply leave the matter lie.”

“From what I’ve been told, Romulus killed Daken’s mother and stole him... right out of her... then raised him himself. As a slave... And hurt him a lot,” Bobby said.

Hercules nodded slowly. “... Devotees to a god presented sacrifices in the old days. At the temples of my father, his attendants slaughtered bulls in his name... At the temple of Romulus... his anointed sacrificed of their own flesh.”

“Fuck!” Bobby exclaimed and ignored the startled and annoyed cafe patrons side-eyeing him. “Why?! I mean seriously, this was a whole thing?! Why was it okay?!”

“... He was the patron god of the city and the empire it became... His order was acceptable to the senate and emperors for many centuries for the maintenance of Pax Deorum,” Hercules explained sedately. “It was never acceptable to Olympus, however. The Feronia were the only Etruscan deities who were not welcomed into Panhellenia.”

“This is-- This is all just shit.” Bobby rubbed his hands over his face; his guts were still frozen and yet the pangs of sympathetic misery were getting through. He wasn’t going to be able to defrost for a while. “And the worse part is that we just-- we didn’t know any of this shit, and we just exiled him!”

“Bobby, you seem to feel a great deal of guilt for a problem that I imagine to have been systemic,” Hercules said gently. “You are not personally responsible for every mistake the X-Men make.”

“Maybe not, but I’m the one who skewered him to a wall and then just... left him there. Trapped and bleeding,” Bobby shook his head, closing his eyes.

“You confronted a man whom you believed to be a serious threat to one of your brood. A man whom you know in utmost fact to be beyond formidable,” Hercules said and reached across the table, laying a hand on Bobby’s arm. “You reacted violently, as a she-bear reacts when a man stands between her and her cubs. The she-bear does not know or care if that man has a rifle, all that matters to her is that he is too close to her young ones.”

Bobby sighed. “I still wish I’d done a rifle-check.”

“It is natural to feel regret for information we have lacked in times gone by.” Hercules leaned back in his chair and graced Bobby with a warm smile, the grim that had overtaken him after hearing Romulus’s name finally starting to wear off. “But it is for the lack of this information that what you did was a mistake and not malice... Have you apologized to the man?”

“Yeah,” Bobby nodded. “He was not super impressed by that. I mean, words are cheap, right? I’ve apologized a few times, and the other day I offered to do whatever he felt I needed to to make it right.” He took a deep breath and blew it out through duck-lips. “Which will probably come back to bite me.”

“I shall hope dearly for your survival,” Hercules said with a smirk. “This burden obviously weighs quite heavily upon you. Is your preoccupation born only of guilt?”

“I...” Bobby frowned and then looked up at Hercules and raised an eyebrow.

“I have seen him,” Hercules replied, grinning.
Bobby grimaced, rolled his eyes, and stuck out his tongue. “You’re a jerk.”

“Am I wrong?” Hercules prodded, tilting his head.

“You can be a jerk without being wrong,” Bobby snorted.

“HA!”

Bobby sighed and shook his head. “That ship passed loudly in the night. He hates me, his kid hates me, I kinda hate me…”

Hercules shrugged. “Hollywood seems to think beginning an association at odds with each other is the highest romance,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, except the romantic comedies generally start out with Person-A insulting Person-B’s favorite band, or stealing Person-B’s favorite seat at the breakfast diner,” Bobby retorted. “If there’s a romantic comedy that starts out with Person-A spilling a gallon or two of Person-B’s blood, I have not seen it.”

Hercules considered that for a moment. “I think most plays involved copious blood-spilling in my youth. Some of them were counted as romantic... Although I cannot think of any in which the one being bled was the ‘love interest’.”

“My point.”

“And so he has scorned your advances,” Hercules said, nodding.

“I- I haven’t made any advances, Herc,” Bobby said. “I practically killed him. He doesn’t want my advances.”

Hercules hummed thoughtfully, glancing away.

“What?”

“It just seems very cowardly. Giving up without the attempt,” Hercules replied with a shrug. “I never thought you a coward.”

“When it comes to my personal life? Uh, yeah, always,” Bobby snorted.

“Well then perhaps I thought the point of your lifestyle changes was to address that,” Hercules shot back, raising an eyebrow.

“Are you daring me?” Bobby demanded.

“Would that work?”

“No. Maybe. Shut up.”

Chapter End Notes

So this fic has gotten pretty weighted to one side because I started out with this goal to make sure Daken had people to talk to, and then got a ways into writing before asking who the heck does Bobby talk to these days? Because Kitty's super busy what with
being the boss of all the things, and also I think we're still at a stage where talking to her about relationship drama is awkward. Especially with so much of her own recently. So Hank, Warren and Jean aren't on-campus, and Hank is in the beginnings of a spiral into insanity, Warren isn't exactly Warren anymore (Bunn didn't really explain what Psylocke did, but my interpretation was that she remapped the second-hand memories she had of Warren's, and her understanding of his personality, onto Angel. That's not a resurrection, that's brainwashing/hypnotizing someone to believe they're someone else. I'm really glad there hasn't been any concrete statements saying that ship is back on, because it would feel really creepy now.) and Jean, I don't know, Jean's also busy.

So anyway, fretted that for a while and being frustrated because I wanted to have more Bobby-sided conversations and introspections to fix the POV-weighting in this fic, then I was like "Why am I just looking inside the X-Men?" Dumb. Also, Hercules is really fun to write. I'm sad that he's out of circulation again. His 2008 series and 2016 series are both some of the best myth-mechanics Marvel has done (apart from the Loki-reboot serieses) and the 2008 series pretty much laid out and defined how mythology is approached in Marvel ever since. If you haven't read either of these, I highly recommend.

Herein Hercules refers to Romulus and Remus as 'Etruscan deities'; this is not consistent with real-world mythology. Yes, the Romulus and Remus myth would have been before the Hellenization of Rome, so 'Etruscan' is a workable adjective, but they were not deities, they were 'legendary mortals'. In Marvelthology, if we assume that Romulus isn't just a huge-ass liar about who he is, then obviously they're not mortal (that 'legendary mortals' become gods has actually already been established as Marvelthology canon, as with Sigurd). Also, Rome's city-god(s), Feronia, is/are not Romulus and Remus, although they share some attributes (like association with wolves) so it's easy to composite them. Also-also, in real-world mythology, Remus is a dude.

If you want a more detailed headcanon-based-on-real-world-mythology for what Hercules was talking about there, I did a myth-mechanics deep dive of it in Walking on Fire.

I kept feeling like this chapter needed another scene, but I've been sitting on it for a week and a half, and have not come up with anything. So I'm just pulling the trigger on it, it's holding up four other chapters that are all basically complete. Also, you may have noticed there's no song for this one. After I decided that I was going to call this done, I thought "Ungh! I still have to come up with a song!" But y'know, I'm kind of sick of spending an hour or two on some chapters just looking for a song to fit them, making sure not to use the same artist twice, and all this other junk... So I'm getting rid of the songs. Maybe I'll put 'soundtrack' lists in the notes sometimes, but I'm not going to keep making an effort to do something artsy with the songs.
Daken talks to his students.

Daken waited until eleven before making his way to Zach’s dormitory, giving him plenty of time for the weekend-coma teenagers were wont to partake in. He arrived with a drink and a pastry, and rapped his knuckles sharply against the door, calling, “Zach, there’s a cafe-junkfood-breakfast in it for you if you wake up now.” A few moments later, the door unbolted; Daken pushed on it and stepped into the room.

Zach was sitting up in his bed, dressed in navy blue pajamas and rubbing his face. “Mmmm?” he mumbled, looking at Daken. “Whadjou get?”

“Strawberry-starfruit iced tea and a cheese croissant,” Daken replied, sitting down on the foot of the bed and handing him the offerings.

“Awesome,” Zach said, scooting himself up closer to the headboard and getting into a cross-legged position to accept the cup and pastry bag.

“I wanted to talk to you about the unarmed combat class,” Daken said, watching Zach open the bag.

“I’m in, right?” he asked brightly, looking up.

“Zach--”

“I’m not?” His eyebrows went up and drew together, face and scent painted with hurt.

“Zach, you would be a distraction for me,” Daken explained. “I wouldn’t be able to give the other students the attention they need if you were there. I- I was hoping we could continue your training one-on-one, like before?”

Hurt turned to hesitant hope. “... Just you and me?” he asked.

“Yes. After classes. Maybe in the evenings,” Daken agreed with a nod. “I’m afraid they might not give you academic credits for it--”

“I don’t care,” Zach shook his head quickly. “That’s fine. Let’s do that. Just you and me. That’s fine.”

Daken smiled and reached over to squeeze his shoulder. “Thank you for understanding,” he said. “I don’t want to deprive my students or you of adequate training.”

“But I get the best training,” Zach said with a grin.

“Well naturally,” Daken agreed.

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“Aldine?” Daken called as he approached two girls sitting in the grass on the front acre.

“Yes, hello, I was expecting you,” the one with dark hair and a satin ribbon tied over her eyes replied, turning her head to smile at him.
“I was wondering if I might have a word in private?” Daken asked.

“It’s not necessary,” Aldine replied. “Polite, yes, I’m sure, but unnecessary.”

“... All right.” Daken knelt down, settling himself next to Aldine and her pink-haired companion. “You’ve been attending my strength and balance class this week,” he noted.

“Yes. I would like to continue to your unarmed combat class,” Aldine nodded.

“And why is that?” Daken asked.

“I believe that developing combat skills independent of my mutation will be beneficial to my confidence and effectiveness in all areas. Even if I never found myself in active combat again (which seems unlikely) it would make me feel more relaxed to know that I would be able to defend myself,” Aldine explained. “And I believe that having a strong understanding of physical combat may also make me better able to understand a combat situation unfolding around me. Even if I am engaging in that situation only with my powers, being able to read the battlefield will be beneficial both to myself and to my comrades.”

Daken nodded, impressed by how carefully articulated the response was. Obviously she’d been prepared for this conversation. “You’re blind,” he pointed out.

“Only visually,” Aldine replied. “The other teachers haven’t allowed me to take combat classes because of that.”

“I see. Well, you’ve made an excellent showing of yourself in strength and balance. The first class will start Monday at two,” Daken said.

“Thank you,” Aldine nodded, smiling.

“Gwynn, you’ll be joining us, of course?” Daken asked, turning to the other girl.

“Oh! Yes! Of course!” Gwynn agreed with a grin, nodding.

“Excellent.” Daken climbed to his feet. “See you both then.”

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“Kincaid?”

The girl spun around, her movements boneless as the sun coming through the windows flashed and flared off her silvery body. “Yes? Hi. Yes?” she asked, smiling.

“A word?” Daken asked, glancing at the other two girls who were walking with her.

“Sure!” she chirped, casting her friends a nod and a grin and then walking with Daken to the nearest empty classroom.

“I wanted to talk to you about the classes I’m teaching,” Daken said.

“Ohuh,” Kincaid nodded, expression bright and open.

“I have no idea how to teach you.”

Her smile faltered and then fell away, looking confused and disappointed.
“Kincaid, your strength and balance skills are flawless, and I have no doubt that you would be beyond formidable on the battlefield. Legitimately deadly, if you had a mind to be,” Daken explained carefully. “The problem is that my combat class is going to be focused on how to best utilize a standard physiology, because that is what I know. I feel that the class simply wouldn’t be useful to you.”

Kincaid looked down and nodded dejectedly. “That’s legit,” she agreed.

“Your abilities are impressive and genuinely beautiful, but they’re so unique that I can’t even think of anyone to recommend as a combat-mentor,” Daken said and watched her perk up a little at the compliments. “I think perhaps the best strategy for you, if you wish to focus on improving your combat skills, is either sparring with a partner or the Danger Room and simply experimenting.”

“That makes sense,” Kincaid agreed.

“If you like, we could look into getting you approved to run Danger Room sessions for yourself,” Daken offered. “You’ve been with the school for a long time, including in its darkest hour, and you’ve been on a combat-team before. You’re well trained and, perhaps I’m misunderstanding, but I don’t think injury is actually an issue for you.”

She tilted her head slightly. “I’ve gotten hurt twice since my mutation kicked in, but it was... people who knew how, who planned to hurt me specifically.” She pursed her lips for a moment, a dark expression crossing her face. “But that’s, um, yeah. Thanks. I’ll think about that.”

“If you decide you’d like to pursue that course, I’ll help you make the pitch to the powers that be,” Daken offered.

“Thank you,” Kincaid smiled again.

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“Borkowski,” Daken called, approaching a group of students playing frisbee.

The diminutive boy looked up and abandoned his position to walk over and meet Daken. “Is this about the class?” he asked.

“In part. May we speak privately, please?”

“Sure,” Borkowski nodded and followed him back into the building.

After locating an empty classroom, Daken turned to Borkowski and paused, parsing his words for a moment, before starting. “Since you’re obviously well beyond a beginner-level fighter, I assume you registered for strength and balance with the hope of moving up to the unarmed combat class?”

“Yes,” Borkowski agreed.

“Because you plan to be an X-Man after you graduate?” Daken asked.

“Well, yeah. I think I’ve got what it takes,” Borkowski nodded.

“You have more than it takes,” Daken replied. “Do you imagine that being an X-Man is the way to make a difference in the world?”

“I... Sir?” Borkowski faltered, giving him a baffled look.

“You struck me as bright, so I pulled your academic records,” Daken said, crossing his arms and
looking down at the boy. “You’re not just moderately bright, you’re gifted.”

A few different colors flitted across Borkowski’s scales as he flustered. “I-- Thank you?”

“And you plan to throw that potential away.”

Borkowski frowned, shifting uncomfortably. “I- I don’t see it as throwing anything away,” he protested, shaking his head. “The X-Men are important--”

“A symbol, an icon, role models for the young mutants, the ‘softer’ face of mutantity for the non-mutants,” Daken rattled off with a scoff. “They are the equivalent of a pro-sports team representing mutantity.”

“That’s not-- The X-Men do stuff. They-- They protect people,” Brokowski retorted.


“Y-Yes?”

“I will advance you to the unarmed combat class on the condition that you begin applying to every school in Forbes’ top twenty colleges that has a law program,” Daken said. Borkowski stared at him, expressions and colors flickering across his face. “I- I don’t... What?”

“If you want to make a difference in this world, if you want to make it better for your fellow mutants and everybody else, the best way that you can do that is by going into law and politics,” Daken said in a calm, firm voice.

Borkowski was silent for more than a minute, continuing to stare at him, before his gaze finally flickered down and he stammered. “I- I can’t afford--”

“I’m paying.”

“What?” He looked back up sharply.

“You write the applications and get accepted to a prestigious law school. I will foot the bill for your tuition and board,” Daken clarified. “I honestly don’t think you’ll have any difficulty getting accepted. You’ll probably have your pick. Not only are your grades exemplary, but you are a box than every school with any pretensions of being ‘progressive’ and ‘forward thinking’ wants to check. You’re an affirmative action shoo-in,” he explained, watching Borkowski’s brow pinch, uncomfortable at the thought. “And some people will recognize that and resent you, claim you don’t deserve it. So prove them wrong. Be better than them. Work twice as hard as any of them and take magna cum laude.”

Borkowski was quiet again for a minute or two, staring back at him. “… Why? Why would you... do that?”

“Because this is how I can make the world a better place for mutants and everybody else,” Daken said.

Borkowski looked away and there was another long pause. His scales had picked up the color and pattern of the carpet. Finally he spoke in a quiet, unsure voice. “I- I guess I should start writing an essay then.”
“Once you have a draft, ask two peers you respect and a teacher to give you notes on it,” Daken said. “Class starts Monday at two.”

“Broo.”

“Hello, Professor Daken!” the alien greeted cheerfully, looking up from a large book.

Daken crouched down in front of his chair. This corner of the library was deserted, close enough to privacy. “You’ve been doing well with strength and balance. I was a little surprised actually, because the crest on your head is so large, but it’s very light, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” Broo agreed.

“You may continue to find the strength and balance useful, but I don’t think my unarmed combat class would be for you,” Daken said.

“Oh,” Broo said and nodded. His expressions and scents were nearly impossible to read due to their intense otherness.

“That class is going to be focused on how to make the best combat use of a standard human physiology, so I don’t think it will prove useful to you,” Daken explained.

“I understand. That’s very reasonable,” Broo replied.

Daken reached out and gently caught the child’s wrist, lifting his hand away from the book. “Your body was clearly designed for combat. With those teeth and claws, it’s obvious that your species is quite well adapted for a level of violence well beyond what an unarmed human is capable of.”

“I... Yes. That’s true,” Broo agreed, nodding.

Daken considered the child’s hesitance for a moment. “... Broo, is the reason you wanted to take a combat class because you’re trying to learn how you would be able to help defend your classmates without killing their attackers?” he asked.

Broo looked down and squirmed in place a little bit. “Yes, sir,” he admitted.

“I see,” Daken nodded and drew a slow breath, thinking that over. “I think... I think there may be other students who find themselves in a similar position,” he said carefully. “I’ll bring this up at the next staff meeting. Maybe another class, with that specific focus, could be put together.”

Broo perked up. “That would be wonderful. I don’t want to kill anybody, but I don’t want to stand idle if my friends are in danger.”

“That’s noble,” Daken said. “I have other students to talk to, but I’m glad you understand. I’m trying to keep the unarmed combat class topically focused because it is going to be intensive.”

“That makes perfect sense,” Broo said, nodding. “Thank you for taking the time to speak with me.”

“Stepford.”

Three girls turned to look at Daken.
“Irma,” he clarified.

Irma walked toward him while Celeste and Phoebe continued walking in the opposite direction. “Yes, Mister Daken?” Irma asked.

“Did you want to take unarmed combat, or were you just in strength and balance for a more intensive workout?” Daken asked.

“I’d like to take the combat course,” Irma replied.

“Why?”

She pursed her lips for a moment and tilted her head. “I can turn into diamond, and my body gets strong when I do, but my telepathy gets very weak. I don’t actually know how to fight. So what good is that?”

“You’ve been a student at the school for seven years and you’ve never learned any combat?” Daken asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Miss Frost didn’t think it was important for us,” Irma shrugged. “She says we’re more valuable in a fight if we stand back and use our powers. But Miss _Frost_ punches people sometimes.”

“Yes, I know. She smashed my head into a concrete floor once,” Daken agreed. “Well, clearly the woman’s a raging hypocrite for any number of reasons. Well done taking the initiative to expand your skill-set. Monday at two.”

“Thank you, Mister Daken,” Irma called as he turned to seek out the next student on his list.

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“Vaccarro,” Daken called, interrupting the same frisbee game for a second time.

“Ah hell yeah! Ninja school!” Vaccarro declared, turning around and hurrying toward Daken.

“Privately, please,” Daken said calmly, waving for him to follow and walking toward the school. Vaccarro followed him, it was easy enough to tell he was giddy despite having no pulse and smelling of stone. Once they were behind closed doors, Daken turned to him and said very calmly, “Vaccarro, I need to explain something that I think has not occurred to you.”

“Yeah, coach?”

“My unarmed combat class is going to be focused on teaching weak, squishy, fleshy people how to fight and defend themselves without weapons, despite the handicap of being weak, squishy, fleshy people,” Daken said.

Vaccarro processed that for a few seconds and then said, “Oh... But, I mean, there’s like, teaching better punching and stuff, right?”

“Yes, but I don’t know what ‘better’ would _be_ for you. I do not have strength anywhere near your level, so I don’t know how to teach to it,” Daken explained carefully. “I don’t think I have anything to really offer you in the way of combat training other than a few suggestions for how to move forward with it.”

“Well, um, okay, how?” Vaccarro asked, confused.

“I’m told that one of your abilities is to ‘explode’ and then reform, but that the reforming takes
about ten minutes,” Daken said and received a nod. “I think that practicing that ability and seeing if you can cut your reform time down is something you should focus on. I don’t know whether you’re in any way vulnerable while you’re in pieces, but your teammates certainly are. In order to support your fellow X-Men, you’re going to need to be present as much as possible.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s a good point,” Vaccarro nodded and then cocked his head to the side. “And you- you think I’m gonna be an X-Man?” he asked.

“I assumed so,” Daken said. “If that’s not something you’re interested in, then I certainly wouldn’t want to--”

“No, dude, no! That’s awesome!” Vaccarro exclaimed. “I mean, obviously I’m perfect for it!”

“You are perfect,” Daken agreed with a smile. “You have a strong drive to protect others, you’re gregarious, and you look cool. You look cool in a fight, but also just in general. You are a good face, literally, to represent mutanity, because you are very obviously not a baseline physiology, but you don’t trigger an uncanny valley reflex either. Your look is intriguing without making people instinctively uncomfortable. And you’re outgoing and fun,” he elaborated, watching Vaccarro puff up with pride a little more on every word. “You’ll represent the X-Men well in a fight, but after the fighting’s over, you’re also going to be fantastic in front of a news camera.”

“Yeah! Yeah I will!” Vaccarro agreed excitedly.

“And as far as improving your combat skills go,” Daken continued, catching the boy’s attention again. “You’ve done plenty of sparring and engaging in active combat before, if you want to improve-- which, it’s admirable that you would put in the effort, I think you should seek out a mentor with super strength. Since Rasputin took his leave, that’s become a hole in the curriculum here, but you don’t have to limit yourself to the faculty,” he suggested. “I know that Ben Grimm is involved in running a youth center, he obviously has an interest in mentoring the next generation. I think you should approach him.”

“Really? I mean, would that be weird?” Vaccarro asked.

Daken shrugged. “I don’t see why. And he may turn you down, if he feels that he’s too busy, but he’s not going to be offended that you asked.”

“Duuude. This is awesome. I am totally gonna do it,” Vaccarro announced.

“I hope it goes well.”

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Daken had informed nine students of their new placement and spoken to all the upper-school students who would not be advancing, leaving just one student left to talk to. Odd, and rather uncomfortable. Daken had been surprised to see his name on the roll in the first place. He’d pushed this moment of awkward off to the end, but it couldn’t, and shouldn’t, be avoided entirely, and so he found a recent scent of his query, an hour old at most, and tracked him down to one of the student rec rooms. Stepping just past the threshold he paused and called, “Genesis.”

The boy looked up from a Mario Kart game and then handed his controller to another student. “Here, ’Lisa,” he said and then pushed himself off the couch and headed towards Daken.

“Ungh. Freakin’ Metal-Peach. You are bad at picking, Evan,” Tager announced as she took control of his abandoned avatar, wrinkling her nose.
“Yes?” Genesis asked, stopping in front of Daken.

Daken jerked his chin toward the door and then stepped back into the hallway, starting toward the nearest cluster of classrooms as Genesis followed. Inside the biology lab, Daken turned back to him. “Why do you want to take a class from me?” he asked.

“... You’re a very skilled fighter and--”

“Bullshit,” Daken snapped. Genesis went quiet, waiting, rather than bothering to correct his lie. “You are an uninjurable omega-level metamorph with super strength. What the hell could any ‘very skilled fighter’ you’ve met possibly teach you?” Daken demanded.

“... Strategy,” Genesis replied.

Daken considered him silently for a moment. “Good answer,” he said. “But back to my original question, which you ignored in favor of effectively changing the subject. Why do you want to be within fifty feet of me?”

Genesis was quiet for a minute, eyes looking away. He wet his lip and said quietly, “I don’t blame you... Yeah, you were pretty scary. You’re really intimidating when you’re playing a role.”

“Playing a role,” Daken repeated scornfully.

“Yes,” Genesis nodded. “You always are, aren’t you?” His eyes glanced up, meeting Daken’s. “It gets easy after a while, playing a part, making the character your reality... Feeling what you should feel is easier than worrying about what you do feel.”

Several minutes of dead air passed between them, neither breaking eye-contact. “... What character do you play?” Daken finally asked.

“Somebody who never feels anger,” Genesis answered. “And you?”

“... Whoever I need to be to get the job done,” Daken said.

“That sounds hard,” Genesis noted. “I spent a lot of time with Laura last year. We talked, when the others weren’t around and it was just her and I. We talked about her experiences and my experiences as... creations. Her, made to turn a profit for weapons contractors, me, to- to just prove some point,” he said quietly, finally looking away. “Sometimes we talked about you. What you did. What was done to you. What you did to yourself.”

“And what’s the point of this?” Daken asked.

“I don’t blame you. I don’t hate you. I’m not afraid of you anymore,” Genesis answered, then bit his lip for a moment, then continued. “Obviously you did some seriously not-okay things on that whole episode with Sabertooth... but you hurt yourself a lot worse than you hurt me.”

“So what is this, a redemption?” Daken demanded, irritated.

“I think it would be pretty pedantic to forgive somebody who hasn’t asked to be forgiven. So, no, I guess not,” Genesis shook his head. “But I’m not angry.”

“Because you’re never angry?” Daken raised an eyebrow at him.

Genesis considered that for a moment and then closed his eyes and nodded. “Yeah. I guess so.”

Daken sighed, “I’m told you’re a gifted student.”
“Yeah, I’m told that too,” Genesis agreed.

“You’ll be declaring this year. What’s your major going to be?”

“Ethics.”

Daken chuckled. “Ethics... Well, perfect. You’ll be going on to law school after that then.”

“I... I mean, I hadn’t really considered it. I don’t think the Institute is likely to suddenly pick up a grad program, since the entire undergrad program isn’t more than fifteen to twenty students,” Genesis said slowly. “And tuition for somewhere else... Aunt Cluster would probably try to spring for it, but I think I’d be a little uncomfortable with the whole dirty-money thing.”

“I’ll be paying. I want to get as many mutants of your generation into law school as possible,” Daken said. “We can’t simply hope that the ‘normal people’ will write just laws for us, our people need to be represented and active in the process.”

“That’s... smart,” Genesis said, nodding, still frowning. “I’m not sure your money is any less dirty than Aunt Cluster’s would be, though.”

“Yes, the stock market is simply filthy,” Daken drawled, rolling his eyes. “And there’s not much to be done now about the original investments. If your aunt was buying, it would mean committing new crimes, refusing my money won’t right past wrongs, it will just make them even more pointless.”

“... Okay. I’ll- I’ll think about it. I’ve still got two years at the Institute, so... I’ll think about it,” Genesis nodded and then looked up. “So, am I in the class?”

“Sure,” Daken sighed. “Monday at two.”

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Having completed the messy business of talking to students about their life-goals, letting the sensitive ones and the ones deserving of special respect down easy, and the slightly more stressful business of confronting Genesis, Daken decided to run the bridle path before dinner. As he was rounding the north end of the reservoir, his ears caught a familiar gait closing in behind him and he slowed to a jog. He glanced sideways as a woman with a dishwater bob came along his side. “Is this a social call, or do you have something for me?” he asked.

“Tomorrow,” the woman replied, and her hand shot out quick as a flash, tucking something the size of a business card into Daken’s pocket. “Time and location.”

“Thank you,” Daken replied.

“Semi-formal. Expect a small crowd,” she added and then sped up and peeled away from him, taking a left at the fork and disappearing down the bend.

Daken pursed his lips and picked up his pace again, mind itching with a static-like buzz of discomfort. The suddennowness held an entirely different kind of anxiety from the waiting. He wouldn’t be getting much sleep tonight.

Chapter End Notes
Dun dun duuuuuun. Next chapter I'll finally let that shoe drop, I know I've been making a few of your crazy.

On 'Aunt Cluster': the Phantomex that got cannibalized by Xavier, do we know if that was just Jean-Phillipe or did the three of them get re-combined at some point during the Secret Wars' time jumps? Was that actually addressed or left ambiguous? It doesn't stick in my memory, so I think if it was addressed, it was in a quick throwaway comment, and if the latter, not actually explained how. Anyway, I'm just going to say for the purposes of this fic, they did not recombine and Charli is off globetrotting and finding herself. Care-packages or postcards show up for Evan every few weeks.

I'll post the next part soon. I got stuck in bed with a fever for a couple days recently and wrote a bunch of stuff that just needed some pushing around and fine-tuning.
Daken is freaking out a little bit.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings:
- Implied abuse
- Unnamed-character deaths
- Named-but-unimportant character death

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daken had lead warm ups, skipped his usual morning run, taken a shower, eaten breakfast (early and on campus), and then parked himself on the patio, sitting on the parapet and pretending to read the book in his hands. It was after eight when Rachel’s ‘voice’ finally called loudly, [Half-lockdown protocols! All students: you are not to leave campus until instructed otherwise! All staff: be assembled in the meeting room in ten minutes!] Daken closed his eyes and let out a sigh, then got to his feet and made his way to the meeting room, pausing briefly by the door to his dormitory to deposit his book inside. Because he wasn’t over-hurried, of course. Because it was probably something that didn’t directly involve him, of course. Because it was probably some false-alarm, of course.

When he strolled into the meeting room, half a dozen people were already present, including Pryde, Rachel and Carol Danvers. Daken raised an eyebrow at her and then turned to Pryde. “I’m pretty sure I have not kidnapped or adopted anyone today,” he said.

“Just sit down, please,” Pryde muttered, averting her eyes. “Laura will be here soon.”

Daken frowned. “Laura? You called Laura and Colonel Avenger? Seriously, what did I do?”

“You didn’t do anything, Daken. Just sit,” Rachel said with forced calm and evasion clear in her voice.

Daken sat down at the table, alternating a suspicious glare between Pryde and Danvers, who both pretended to ignore him. The rest of the staff filtered into the room and settled themselves around the table. Daken started and turned suddenly as the door opened and he smelled Logan. “You weren’t even here,” Daken protested, tensing up as he watched his father walk in followed closely by The Captain, both smelling of a moment’s layover in Limbo. “They teleported you in! What is this? I didn’t do anything!”

“Daken--” Rachel started.

“I didn’t do anything!"

“It ain’t about you, kid,” Logan said grimly.

“Then what is it about?!” Daken demanded.

Nearly the entire staff was in the room by then and so Pryde sighed and stood up. “At three AM our time, security at the Box was… Bellona, Laura’s other clone, was taken,” she said.

Danvers folded her hands on the table in front of her and cleared her throat as tension in the room
kicked up a notch and all eyes turned to her. “I’ve seen security footage of when she was grabbed. It was forceful and rough. This isn’t a prison-break, it’s a kidnapping,” she said gravely.

“You incompetent--!” Daken sputtered, gripping the edge of the table and glaring at her.

“Daken, calm--” Rachel tried.

“Did your prison guards even try to stop it or are they just happy to have one less mutant living on the taxpayers’ hospitality?!“ Daken demanded.

“Back off!” Danvers snapped, glaring back at him. “Number one, they are not my prison guards and four of them died in the attack. Number two, the people who took Bellona were pros and had inside knowledge of the facility. They knew every security feature and how to counter it.”

Daken stared at her silently for a second or two. Nobody was supposed to die. He had specifically said that dead feds would attract too much scrutiny. There were not supposed to be bodies. He shoved that detail away and smoothly recovered his outrage. “Three AM!” he snarled. “You sat on this for five hours! Doing nothing!”

“Knock it off! This isn’t helping!” Pryde snapped.

At that moment the door opened again, and Laura and Gabby came rushing in with Rasputin close behind them. Gabby’s face was streaked with tears. “Daken!” she wailed, throwing herself at him as Daken stood and caught her. “Daken, they took Bellona! Bad-guys took my sister!”

Daken wrapped his arms around her and turned his head to glare at Pryde. “Why are we still here?! Why are we not out there finding her?!”

“We’re not sure yet who we’re dealing with,” Danvers said. “They came in dressed like Hydra, which might mean they’re a cell that’s managed to keep ahead of us since the collapse, or it might mean that some other ass-holes are wearing surplus Hydra uniforms as a joke or a misdirect.”

“Fantastic.” Daken growled at her and then turned his glare back to Pryde. “Again: why are we sitting on our hands?!”

“Because the only thing we know for sure right now is that somebody out there broke into a very high security place to kidnap a young mutant,” Pryde said coolly. “And I will be damned if I’m leaving the school on a skeleton crew with that happening. We’re waiting for Rogue’s team to get here.”

“To hell with that!” Daken pulled away from Gabby and started toward the door.

“Daken,” Laura grabbed his arm and gripped it tight, anchoring him. “We need a plan.”

“You people need a plan,” Daken snapped, glaring back at her. “My plan is to hit the underground and see what’s being auctioned on the black market tonight.”

“That’s… not bad,” Laura admitted, glancing to Pryde.

“Not alone, you’re not,” Pryde said sternly.

“You don’t--” Daken started and then turned sharply when the door opened again.

Rogue and her team, plus a husband extra, walked in. “Where are we at?” she asked.

“I’ll catch you up,” Rachel said, closing her eyes.
“I’m leaving,” Daken announced, focusing his glare back on Pryde so as not to look at Johnny.

“No. We’re going to do this in pairs. Rogue’s team and A-team—”

“I can’t work this with any of you heroes,” Daken cut her off. “The place I am going to be most useful is schmoozing, intimidating and threatening my way through the dregs and disreputables. If I show up with a known hero in tow, I won’t be able to get anything.”

“Daken, I do not—” Pryde started.

“Daken’s right,” Remy interjected, and Pryde paused, frowning uncertainty at him. “You put anybody wit’ a rep for being on the side of the angels wit’ him, ain’t nobody gon’ talk. I’ll go wit’ him.”

Pryde was silent for two seconds and then gave a sharp nod. “Okay. You two go charm the literal pants off of the criminal underworld. But I want you chipped before you leave so Daken doesn’t decide to do anything disgusting with his cellphone. If you get a lead, call it in.”

“On it,” Remy nodded and turned to Daken. “Let’s get to it, Frère.”

“Fine,” Daken said, and then turned and leaned down, putting his hand on Gabby’s shoulder and looking her in the eye. “I’m going to find her,” he promised.

“I believe you,” Gabby whispered.

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Daken didn’t say a word until they were stepping out of the park, then as they waited for the crossing light, he finally glanced at Remy. “We can cover more ground—”

“If we split up?” Remy guessed.

“You agree?”

“... You’re nervous and you’re trying t’ ditch me,” Remy said quietly as the light changed and they started crossing the street. “So tell me what dat’s about.”

“We might both be known for operating outside of the law, but we have very different images within the underworld. If you’re there, nobody’s going to take a death-threat seriously,” Daken explained quietly. “On my own, I can make them wet themselves.”

“Dat’s a very good and convincing point,” Remy noted. “Now stop bullshitting me.”

Daken was quiet for a few seconds as they hit the far curb and started toward the subway entrance. Finally he spoke in an even lower, more guarded voice than before. “You’re mother-in-law texted me this morning. She said she wanted to meet me ‘for coffee’ at ten.”

Remy was quiet for a few steps, processing that. “… You t’ink she’s involved?” he asked.

“Unlikely. The only motivation I could see for it is to hurt Logan. Attacking a girl he’s never met would be a clumsy way to go about it, and it would also alienate me,” Daken replied, shaking his head. “I’m more inclined to assume that she overheard something.”

“And she bringing it to you because she like you and she like you owing her a favor even more,” Remy nodded.
“Exactly,” Daken agreed. “And she’s not going to give me a thing if you’re there.”

“Yeah, she never had much warm feelings for me,” Remy sighed and bit his lip, thinking. “... You got your phone?” he asked, glancing at Daken.

“Yes.”

“You gon’ text me every twenty minutes telling me you alive and well,” Remy said. “You late by one minute, I call the school and have dem ping your tracker.”

“Understood,” Daken agreed.

“Okay,” Remy put a hand on his shoulder briefly and squeezed it. “Call me when you got somet’ing. We meet back up and check it out togeder.”

“Okay,” Daken nodded.

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Keeping a school full of enthusiastic mutant children indoors during a mysterious semi-emergency was hard on any day, but on a sunny weekend in June it bordered on impossible. Bobby had ended up trapped behind Kitty’s desk just to say ‘no’ whenever the door opened (every two minutes) while the rest of B-team and unteamed staff patrolled the grounds and tried to keep an eye on the students. The upperclassmen were fairly cooperative once given the briefest explanation that people who may or may not be Hydra may or may not be kidnapping mutant kids. Telling them that they were in charge of the younger students’ safety satisfied most of them. It was the younger kids, the ones too inexperienced to actually be scared of mutant-haters and abusers, that proved more challenging.

Pointing out to a freshman that they were not combat-approved, and that they were a minor so therefor double-not-combat-approved, had little effect. Telling them that if they were really bored and didn’t have enough to do he could assign them more math homework yielded far more favorable results. Zach had been somewhat more troublesome; so far he’d been in the office four times demanding to know where Daken was. It had been a half hour since his last visit though, so Bobby assumed he must have given up and gone to interrogate one of the other teachers. Good, Bobby knew keeping the search quiet was a safety and security issue, but he felt scummy every time he deflected and chased Zach away without answers.

Then Bobby’s phone issued the distinctive sound of a priority ring. He tensed and pulled it out, looking at the screen and frowning in confusion for a moment at the caller name. It was marked with the emergency tag, and Bobby tensed a little more as he hit accept. “Daken?”

“I got the drop information and now I’m across the street from a packing warehouse filled with god damn Purifiers,” Daken’s voice answered.

“I-- shit! You were supposed to call Kitty with this. Hang on, I can conference--”

“Shut up and listen to me,” Daken snapped. “I’m counting damn near twenty in there. If this turns into a shoot-out, somebody will get hurt. And the drop hasn’t happened yet. If the sellers smell anything wrong, it won’t happen and we’ll lose her again.”

“I... Why are you calling me?” Bobby demanded, confused.

“Because those Purifiers need to be taken down before they realize they’re under attack. I need
somebody who can take twenty people in thirty seconds,” Daken explained. “You said you wanted to make things right. If that’s not enough reason, then I promise to make it worth your damn while later. Get your ass down here, and freeze these bastards in their tracks before they can pull a trigger.”

Bobby stared straight ahead, processing Daken’s words and seeing the logic in them. “I should run this by--”

“If you call Pryde, she’s going to bring a dozen idiots in brightly colored spandex. The Purifiers will see them coming and somebody’s going to get shot,” Daken cut him off. “This has to be quiet, fast and surgical. I’ll text you an address. Do not slide across town on your little ice rollercoaster, they must not see you coming.”

“Daken--”

“This isn’t a monologuing super villain or a kaiju wandering around downtown, Drake! This is one terrorist cell meeting another terrorist for a black market sale,” Daken cut in again. “We need to catch them by surprise, and when I say that, I mean seconds, not minutes. Bringing an X-Men team in here is going to get my sister killed. If you can’t make this decision, then just forget I called. I’ll do it alone.”

“Stop, stop, slow down--”

“No! No slowing down! Do you not get that this is real and not some game?!” Daken exclaimed. “Never mind. Forget I called. I’ll- I’ll think of something else.”

“I’m coming!” Bobby blurted, panicking. “I’ll come. Wait for me. I’ll come. Just-- I need to figure out a way to get there without the ice slides.”

“Ask your mommy to drive you! Can you really not think of any other means of transportation?!”

“I’ll be there!” Bobby snapped. “I’m coming! Jesus Christ, calm down!”

“Meet me on the roof,” Daken told him. “The Purifiers are on the north side of the address I’m sending you. Do not go anywhere near the north side, do not let yourself be seen from that angle.”

Okay. Got it. I’ll be there soon,” Bobby agreed and then heard the beep of the call ending. Bobby put the phone back in his pocket and bit his lip for a moment, then got up and left Kitty’s office. He went downstairs and jogged to the art room, and was relieved to see pink. “Pixie! Can I have a word?”

Megan looked up from her lump of clay with a startled expression that turned nervous and nodded, hopping up and hurrying out to join him in the hall as Bobby pulled up the address Daken had sent him on his phone. “Am I in trouble or something?”

“I just need you to drop me and then come back here,” Bobby said, trying to sound calm and confident. “It’s kind of an emergency, but… I think it’ll be okay for two seconds?”
“Wow, you really don’t sound so sure,” Megan winced.

“Two seconds, then you come straight back here,” Bobby said firmly and pointed on the screen. “I need you to drop me in the alley on the south side of this building. The south part is super important.”

Megan bit her lip and nodded. “Okay. I can do that,” she agreed and then looked up again and lifted her arms. “Sihal novarum chinoth!”

There was a pink, glittery flash, and a moment later they were standing in the alleyway. Bobby let out a tense breath. “... Okay. You go right home.”

“Okay,” Megan said, giving him a worried look. “Don’t get hurt or anything.”

“That’s the idea,” Bobby agreed, smiling. He held it as she cast her spell and disappeared again, then he looked up at the building and built an ice pillar beneath him to elevator himself quickly to the top.

When he reached the roof, he spotted Daken crouched against the opposite parapet with some very high-tech looking binoculars. He twisted and glanced over his shoulder to look at Bobby a moment later and then turned back to the view below him, bringing the binoculars back to his face. Bobby walked quickly and quietly across the roof, ducking lower and then crouching as he reached Daken and scooted up next to him on his knees. “That warehouse?” he asked quietly, not sure if the quiet was really necessary at this distance but not feeling like taking chances.

Daken held the binoculars out to him. “... There’s so many,” he muttered, his voice pinched with stress. “I saw two of them arrive. They’re definitely Purifiers. There’s fucking nineteen of them in there.”

Bobby held the binoculars up to his eyes and found that they were giving him a thermal image, showing yellow-orange people walking around inside of the warehouse. “That’s... probably more than one cell,” Bobby noted, mouth feeling very dry.

“I thought I’d be able to handle whatever-- Fucking nineteen Purifiers! What kind of fucking overkill is that?!” Daken demanded, and when Bobby lowered the binoculars and looked back at him, he saw fear in Daken’s eyes.

“Hey,” he said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay. We got this.”

“She isn’t here yet,” Daken whispered. “The drop’s not supposed to be for an hour... I didn’t think you’d get here this quickly.”

“I changed into uniform after the meeting,” Bobby said. “And I got Pixie to drop me off just now.”

“Pixie?!” Daken demanded, suddenly furious. “I tell you to get here inconspicuously and you choose the most drag-queen mode of transportation possible?!”

“Dude. We landed in the alley. Nobody saw us,” Bobby protested.

“How sure are you?”

“I’m sure!”

Daken turned away, pulling his phone out and sending a text.
“What was that?” Bobby asked, frowning.

“Gambit’s terms when we split up. If I stop sending regular updates that I’m not dead or captured, he drops a team of X-Men on my tracker location,” Daken replied and shoved the phone back into his pocket. “Which would utterly destroy our element of surprise, and whoever’s supposed to be making the drop would turn around and go home.” He bit his lip and glared down at the warehouse.

“Hey. Daken. It’s going to be okay,” Bobby said gently, petting his back a little as he set the binoculars down on the surface of the roof. Daken looked back up at him and Bobby was confused by what he was seeing for a moment before he realized there was blood on Daken’s lip. He was really biting himself. “What are you-- Don’t do that.” Bobby defrosted and reached out, cupping Daken’s jaw.

Daken let go of his lip and ran his tongue across it quickly, sweeping away the blood as it healed. “… I wasn’t expecting this,” he whispered. “This is… What the hell am I supposed to do against this?”

“Call for help,” Bobby said, forcing himself to stay calm. “And you did.”

His breath caught for a moment as Daken suddenly moved forward, wrapping his arms around Bobby and pressing his face into Bobby’s shoulder. He was trembling just a little. “I’m so stupid,” he hissed.

“No,” Bobby shook his head, returning the hug. “No no no, you’re not. What you said on the phone, about not doing this loudest-way-possible, you’re right. It’s a good strategy and… you’re probably right about Kitty not listening to it.”

Daken took a slightly shuddering breath. “Do you know what you smell like?” he asked.

Bobby was thrown by the non sequitur for a moment. “Axe body-spray?”

“… No?” Daken sounded equally confused.

“Well that’s good. I don’t use it, so that would have been a bit weird,” Bobby said, feeling even more awkward at how lame and not-even-a-real-joke that came out.

“Did you ever go to the city aquarium when you were a child?” Daken asked softly next to Bobby’s collarbone.

“… Yeah?”

“Do you remember seeing the little albino cave-fish?”

“Uuhh,” Bobby nodded.

“Their bodies were all translucent like frosted glass, their scales, their flesh, all clear-ish?” Daken kept going on the altogether weird tangent.

“Right,” Bobby agreed.

“Except for a dark, greasy stain right in the middle of them,” Daken continued. “Their digestive tract. Their stomach, intestine and colon ruining their cellophane perfection.”

Bobby struggled to remember that insignificant little detail of his childhood. “Okay.”
Daken moved his arm and poked a finger gently into Bobby’s side at tummy-level. “And when you transform?”

“... I’m clear,” Bobby said, understanding the comparison now but still having no earthly clue what Daken was trying to get at.

“Everything that’s inside of you turns into pure, perfect water,” Daken said, wrapping the arm back around him. “And when you change back… you smell like someone who’s never consumed a preservative or eaten anything grown with pesticides or ever- ever eaten dairy or anything remotely odoriferous.”

“I… did not know that,” Bobby said, slightly fascinated now.

Daken lifted his head a little and murmured right against Bobby’s neck, “You smell... clean. It’s beautiful.”

“... Oh… Thanks…” Bobby felt his heart flutter and his face heat up.

“Thank you for coming,” Daken whispered.

“You’re welcome,” Bobby mumbled.

“Am I?”

“What?”

“Welcome?” Daken pulled away a little bit to look at him.

Bobby’s mouth opened and closed uselessly for a moment, staring back at him. “... I…”

“It’s not a good time though,” Daken muttered, shaking his head and letting Bobby go. He pulled out his phone and texted Gambit again.

Time passed in agonizing semi-silence with Daken watching the warehouse and the streets around it through his binoculars, focusing in like a bird of prey on every new presence or movement below, and pausing every fifteen minutes or so to text Gambit again. Meanwhile Bobby struggled to pay any attention on the world around them and not Daken’s high cheekbones or perfect biceps. His mind kept skipping like a record back to the hug and Daken’s weird, fishy explanation of Bobby’s smell. For most people, it would be kind of weird and intimate to talk about how somebody smells (in a good way, anyway) but smell was a much bigger part of Daken’s life, so was it actually an intimate conversation?

Beautiful. Daken said he smelled beautiful. That was comparable to somebody else telling him he looked beautiful, wasn’t it? It was obviously a compliment, and even if it was stating a fact, there were lots of people Bobby might look twice at walking around town, but he didn’t just go up and tell people they were beautiful like it was nothing. But maybe Daken did. He charmed his way through life, telling people they’re beautiful just ‘cause was pretty charming. But his usual charm probably didn’t involve trembling in someone’s arms.

Or did it? Could Daken play the weak Victorian belle straight out of an old-timey romance novel, collapsing overcome into his hero’s arms? He probably could, but this wasn’t that. He was worried about the little sister he’d never met and a small army of Purifiers. Purifiers were terrifying. Even if the monsters in Bobby’s own nightmares were the Right, he knew that domestically the Purifiers had the largest mutant body-count on their books. And overwhelmingly mutant children. He knew that for the students at the school now, the Purifiers were the boogieman. He didn’t know if Daken
had any personal experience with them, but Laura or Logan had probably told him a thing or two, and he probably knew about the body-count.

Bobby was pulled out of his thoughts by the sound of Daken growling in the back of his throat and picking his binoculars up off the parapet in front of him. “That car has gone by twice,” he murmured. “They’re checking out the drop-point.”

“Or Google maps lost its GPS signal,” Bobby pointed out, leaning a little closer over the edge to look at the car as Daken focused his binoculars on it.

“Six in the car. One of them in the trunk,” Daken snapped, tensing even more.

“Sounds like our guys!” Bobby said, grabbing Daken around the waist.

“What--!” Daken gasped in confusion, dropping the binoculars a little heavily as Bobby pulled them both to their feet.

“I’ll seal the warehouse and chill out the Purifiers, you take the car!” Bobby said, dragging Daken off the roof with him onto a steeply dropping ice-slide.

“Fine!” Daken agreed as they plummeted.

Bobby curved the slide out over the road above the car’s path and Daken leapt away from him, landing on the hood with a loud crunch as Bobby hooked his slide around and threw himself at the warehouse. He slammed his hand against the large barn doors, icing over the mechanisms and sealing the edges, then closing his eyes and concentrating on building a few inches of ice around the entire building. He could hear commotion coming from inside the warehouse as the Purifiers realized what was happening and guns started firing. He could also hear screams and shouts and more gun fire from the street where Daken was taking on the kidnappers.

With the building sealed, Bobby turned his attention toward building ice-golems on the inside. As his drones formed, the inside of the warehouse came into sight and he watched the Purifiers, already starting to shake in the sudden sub-zero temperature within, spin around and start screaming and firing at his golems. Bobby set to work shackling Purifiers, encasing their disgustingly high-tech guns in ice, and throwing slush at the more nimble ones to help them down the road to hypothermia.

He kept dropping the air temperature and the Purifiers got slower and clumsier. He’d finished freezing over all of their weapons, but they wouldn’t have been able to pull the triggers anyway now, he could see the frostnip in their cheeks and the chilblains on their fingers. They started dropping. Bobby let the temperature come back up to only refrigerator-cool as he watched the stragglers moving quickly from stage two to stage three hypothermia. When the Purifiers had all gone still or were at least on the ground, Bobby sighed in relief and pulled his hands away from the barn doors, having to yank them free of a glazed crust, and left two golems standing sentry as he turned around to check on Daken.

And there was that blood-bath he’d seemed so worried about. “... Fuck,” Bobby whispered and started running over. “Daken!” he shouted, trying not to look too closely at the green-clad bodies, which were now painted in a Christmas color-scheme and motionless on the ground. “Daken!”

“What?” Daken snapped, at the trunk now, covered in blood.

“What did you-- You can’t just--”

“They were Hydra,” Daken snapped, glaring at him for a moment as Bobby came up next to him.
He slammed a claw into the lock mechanism on the trunk and twisted. The tip of his claw splintered and snapped with the force, but Daken didn’t even seem to notice as it did the trick and he was able to drag the trunk open.

Bobby turned his gaze to look at the newly revealed interior, where a pale and white-haired girl was laying with her hands shackled together in metal mittens, her feet in a similar state, and a strip of duck tape across her mouth. Her eyes were half-open, but they weren’t looking at anything. She was limp and didn’t move or react as Daken pulled off his shirt, using the dryer parts to wipe away the blood that had soaked through onto his chest, and cast it aside. He ducked and reached into the trunk, carefully peeling the duck tape away and then sliding his arms around Bellona to carefully lift her out.

“It’s okay, Bellona. It’s over now. It’s all over,” Daken murmured, cradling her against his chest as she continued to be limp and doll-like in his arms. He kissed her forehead and shifted her to get her head on his shoulder, and she stayed still, eyes half-open but unseeing. “My name is Daken. I’m your brother,” he told her and then glanced briefly at Bobby. “Call Danvers. We need the FBI, or whoever’s handling domestic terrorists now, to do whatever it is they do here.”

Bobby nodded and bit his lip, again forcing himself not to look at the dead Hydra goons on the ground as he pulled out his phone and dialed up Carol first. When it went straight to her voicemail options, Bobby keyed in the emergency code, and a few moments later the line picked up. “Go ahead,” Carol’s voice answered.

“Carol, we found her… Daken found her,” Bobby said awkwardly, mind racing. “And, um, I’ve got nineteen hypothermic Purifiers that are gonna probably need some medical attention before they go to jail… and also your Hydra guys. I- I can text you the address now. We probably need some… whoever locks people up now… acronym… people.”

“Kitty didn’t inform me we were moving on a location,” Carol said.

“Um. Yeah. I’m going to call Kitty next and… be in a lot of trouble,” Bobby agreed.

“… Okay. Send me the address. I’ll be there ASAP. Out,” Carol said, then the call ended.

Bobby copied the address from Daken’s earlier text and sent it to Carol, then called Kitty. “Kitty, I know you’re going to be pissed at me, but you can yell at me later,” he said quickly. “Daken and me have got Bellona and also I froze a bunch of Purifiers and I’m gonna send you the address now.”

“You were supposed to stay at the school!” Kitty exclaimed, anger in her voice.

“I’m sorry! You’re mad and you’re right to be mad and I’m gonna send you the address now and you can yell at me so much when we get home!” Bobby blurted in a rush.

“You-- God damn it, Bobby! Fine! Send me the address!” Kitty snapped and ended the call.

Bobby pasted the address into her text window as well and looked up in time to see Carol swooping down toward them. She stopped short, bobbing up like a hummingbird and looking around at the Hydra bodies with dismay. “… I’m going to assume this is Daken’s work?” she asked.

“They weren’t masqueraders, they’re genuine flavor Hydra,” Daken responded grimly and motioned with his chin toward one of the bodies. “Flip that one over and I think you’ll recognize Viper.”

“Well they certainly won’t be giving us any information on other remaining agents still at large,”
Carol noted disapprovingly.

“They wouldn’t anyway. They’re Hydra. Nobody but the Red Room trains their agents better at resisting interrogation,” Daken retorted. “I just gave you Madam fucking Hydra, Danvers. Feel free to take credit for that on your resume. It’s all yours.”

Carol groaned and settled her feet down on the pavement, then frowned as she looked at Bellona. “Has she been drugged?”

“Drugs don’t have a long or significant effect on us,” Daken replied.

“She’s catatonic or something.” Bobby said, glancing at the girl himself with worry gnawing at the pit of his stomach. “Her eyes are open, but--”

“She’s not catatonic,” Daken cut him off. “She just doesn’t have anything to say.”

“She looks pretty catatonic,” Carol noted.

“She’s not. I can hear and smell her reacting to the things around her. She’s not catatonic,” Daken insisted.

“Fine. Let’s--” Carol started and then turned as Kitty and Illyana appeared in momentary yellow spotlights. “Kitty. Good. I’ve got agents on their way to process this scene and-- where are the Purifiers you mentioned?” she asked, turning back to Bobby.

“In the warehouse. It’s a fridge right now,” Bobby said, gesturing toward the warehouse. “They’re definitely going to need to be treated for hypothermia, some of them might have a little frostbite.”

“Right,” Carol nodded. “The FBI will take them and I’ve got CSA agents on their way to take Bellona back--”

“LOOK AT HER FACE, DANVERS!” Daken shouted suddenly, livid. Carol jumped and turned back to him. “She’s got to be nearly ten kilos underweight! Those bastards at the Box have clearly been starving her!”

Everyone took a closer look at Bellona and Bobby felt slightly ill as he took in the lines of her face. She was downright gaunt, cheekbones standing out like ridges above pale, hollow valleys. “... What the hell is this, Carol?” Kitty whispered.

“They wouldn’t starve an inmate,” Carol said, voice wavering a tiny bit as a hint of worry and doubt showed on her face.

“Because the United States has such a sterling record of maintaining human rights in its offshore detention facilities?!” Daken demanded. “Oh, but the legislators are still divided on whether human rights even apply to mutants, aren’t they? And she’s just a clone, so she definitely doesn’t get to be human, isn’t that right?” He snarled, taking an aggressive step toward Carol despite being burdened by the girl in his arms. “This doesn’t happen in half a day, Danvers. This happened at the Box.”

“Carol, this- this is not okay,” Kitty said, brow pinched, and bit her lip.

“I agree, and I’m going to look into--”

“Why isn’t she saying anything?” Illyana demanded. “Her eyes are open. She’s awake. Why isn’t she saying anything?”
“Something’s wrong with her,” Bobby said quietly.

“She’s been traumatized,” Daken growled, eyes still fixed on Carol and glaring. “She’s been starved and abused and you want to send her back so they can finish putting her in a grave.”

“I don’t--”

“Carol, she can’t go back there,” Kitty said, her voice firm even though her face was still scared and confused. “I don’t know what happened to her at the Box, but this isn’t okay.”

“Kitty, she killed thirty innocent people in Daylesville,” Carol said, her brow pinched.

“The Facility killed thirty people using her as a gun,” Daken snapped. “And when exactly was her trial date, Danvers? She did receive due process, right? Seeing as all the people who were arrested by SHIELD under terrorist protocols and denied their civil rights have now been released for constitutional violations,” he added, getting a little louder and angrier on every word. “Everybody except the mutants.”

Carol pursed her lips for a moment, staring silently back at him, then turned her head to meet Kitty’s eyes. “Take her to the school. Keep her on campus. Call Jennifer immediately. There is going to be a lot of paperwork,” she said.

Kitty nodded and then stepped closer to Daken, phasing the gauntlets and boots off of Bellona before turning to Illyana. “Take them home and come back, please.”

“On it,” Illyana agreed, walking over to Daken as stepping disks appeared.

Chapter End Notes

This is part one of three. I'll post the next part later this week. Is this a worthy payoff for the teasers? Are you surprised? Daken's reasonings will be explained a little better next chapter.
Daken pretends to be calm but he isn't.

They appeared in the main foyer with a couple dozen students around, who all turned to give them wide-eyed looks. Daken was shirtless, smeared with Hydra blood, and carrying a girl who looked more or less unconscious. “I’m heading back,” Rasputin said.

“Can you bring Laura and Gabby here too?” Daken asked, and he heard Bellona’s pulse quicken at the names.

“Let me check in with Kitty first, tell her what’s up and get their twenty,” Rasputin said with a shallow nod.

“Thank you,” Daken said as she disappeared. He turned toward the main stairs and started walking, then paused and searched with his nose before looking to his right and calling, “Ichiki-san.”

The girl started slightly and then hurried over. “Hai?”

“<Please excuse my rudeness, but my hands are very full. My wallet is in my left back-pocket,>” Daken said calmly.

“Um.” Confusion flashed across Ichiki’s face for a moment and then her cheeks colored slightly and she nodded, walking around Daken and gingerly trying to tug his wallet out without touching his buttocks. “Hai,” she announced when she pulled it lose.

“<Open, please,>” Daken said, and Ichiki opened the wallet and held it up for him to see. “<The blue visa. Buy a full change of clothes and a set of pajamas for someone Laura’s size. And simple, size-eight sneakers. Bring them to my dormitory, please.>”

Ichiki pulled out the card and looked up at him uncertainty. “<The lockdown?>”

“<The cause of it has been eliminated. I will take responsibility for breaching protocols,>” he assured her.

“Okay,” she nodded, putting the card into her own pocket, and then bit her lip, holding the wallet awkwardly, and pinking a little again.

“<Just lay it on her belly, please,>” he nodded toward Bellona. “Domo.”

“Doitashimashite,” Ichiki nodded quickly and set the wallet on top of Bellona, then hurried toward the door.

Daken turned to the stairs again. He made his way up the halls to his own suite, pausing in front of the door to address it out loud. “Lock override: Daken Akihiro. My hands are full,” he announced and the door popped inward, swinging well out of the way to let him walk in. He set Bellona gently down on the couch, leaning her in the corner of it so she could stay limp without falling over. Pocketing his wallet, he went to the mini-fridge hidden within a small cherry end table at its side, and took out a protein drink, shaking it up as he moved over to sit next to Bellona.

He pulled her into his lap and cracked the seal, leaning her against him as he held the bottle up to her lips. “Please drink, Bellona,” he said softly, dropping simultaneous pheromone dumps to
inspire comfort and hunger. He could hear and feel her sniff, and he could taste momentary unease before she succumbed to the comfort pheromones, and after a minute, she opened her mouth and swallowed as he tipped the bottle up slightly. “Thank you, and I’m sorry for this, but you have me very frightened. I’ve read your file from the Box. It said that you refused food and the doctors fitted you with a feeding tube three times... You wanted to die, didn’t you?”

Bellona was silent. She stopped drinking and Daken smelled tears.

He kissed her forehead and tightened his arm around her slightly. “I’m sorry it took so long... I only found out that you existed recently,” he whispered. “And then I had to plan things carefully to get your freedom. If I’d come and taken you out of there myself we would have had to go on the run, and you wouldn’t be able to see Gabby.”

Bellona tilted her head up slightly, her eyes finally focusing as she looked at him.

“She’ll be here soon,” Daken assured her and kissed her head again. “She doesn’t know that I was the one who had you taken out of the Box. Nobody knows. Not even the people who took you. It had to be secret, and it still has to,” he said. “I’m sorry if they hurt you. They were hired by a friend. I couldn’t know too many details, so that you or I wouldn’t be implicated. It needed to look like they intended to sell you. The government doesn’t protect mutants, and it wants to make you property,” he explained. “They want you to be their weapon, and I expect the only reason you hadn’t been taken out of the Box and put into some off-the-books black ops program is because you refused to eat. You made them believe you were too broken to be useful.”

Bellona kept staring silently up at him as Daken sighed, eyes moving over her sharp cheekbones, skin stretched over them with not enough flesh between.

“It’s good that they think you’re too broken,” he murmured, kissing her head again and touching the bottle back to her lip. “They won’t fight hard to keep you. But please drink. You need your strength. Gabby would be sad if you kept starving yourself.”

She opened her mouth and started drinking again. Daken stayed quiet while she finished the bottle and then set it aside and wrapped his newly freed arm around her. “It’s going to be okay,” he told her softly. “The X-Men are good political protection right now, and we’ll make sure to get a legally binding absolution for anything Alchemex and the Facility forced you to do before the politicians turn genocidal again... You’re going to be able to see Gabby and hold her. And I’ll protect you... I understand the decisions you made, I’ve made them too... Turning to one devil to save you from another... I understand.” He kissed her head and heard Bellona sigh softly.

There was a short quiet that was interrupted by a loud and overzealous knock on the door. “Daken!” Gabby’s voice called through the speaker. Bellona stirred in his arms, her head turning toward the door.

“Open,” Daken called back to the door.

Gabby came rushing into the room with Laura close behind her. “Bellona!” she shrieked, throwing herself at her sister.

“Gabby...” Bellona whispered, the sound dry and papery as she came alive a little more and reached back, putting an arm around Gabby’s shoulders.

Daken shifted, getting himself out from under her and setting Bellona down on the couch. She didn’t let herself fall over, staying upright against the cushions with Gabby clinging to her like a limpet, mumbling and sobbing. Daken stood up and Laura wandered after him as he made his way
into the bathroom, pulling a washcloth out of the cabinet and wetting it. “How did you find her?” Laura asked quietly.

“I was given a tip by a contact in the underworld for where and when she was being sold,” Daken said, scrubbing at the congealed and dried blood on his skin.

“How?”

Daken paused for a moment, and then started scrubbing himself again. “Plausible deniability, Laura. You don’t need to know everybody I kill.”

“... You were here to distance yourself from that sort of thing,” Laura said.

“My little sister was captured by monsters with no regard for her wellbeing, who saw her as nothing but a weapon to be used or traded,” Daken replied calmly, washing his neck.

“... Did it feel good? Killing the Hydra agents? Did you miss that?” Laura asked.

“... I felt nothing,” Daken whispered and shook his head. “... Killing isn’t pleasure or pain. It’s a neutral act, ugly but holding no particular existential value. It’s the same as defecation.”

Laura took a deep breath and sighed.

Daken rinsed the washcloth and rang it out in the sink, then set it to dry on the bar before turning and kneeling down by the bathtub. He turned on the tap and held his hand under it to adjust the temperature, then stood up and turned back to Laura. “Bellona’s weak. She hasn’t been eating. You and Gabby should help her with a bath. Ichiki’s bringing her clothes to wear afterwards,” he said.

Laura nodded, her brow pinching slightly. “What’s going to happen to her?”

“Pryde got a good look at her. I very much doubt the X-Men will be letting the feds take her back,” Daken replied, shaking his head. “And Danvers let us take her for now, which goes a long way to indicate she’s on our side, since I’m sure she doesn’t have the authority to make a decision like that.”

Laura nodded again and bit her lip.

“She’ll stay here, Laura. Your plate is full and the kind of help she’s going to need is a few steps above your paygrade,” Daken told her gently.

“I... I let S H I E L D take her,” Laura whispered, looking down. “I didn’t say anything. And I didn’t look back... I knew the deaths in Daylesville were on Kimura, and I knew Bellona only did any of it because she was angry and terrified and in pain... And trying to protect Gabby.”

“Laura,” Daken caught her chin and lifted her head. “... It’ll be okay now. Bellona is safe. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Laura’s eyes glanced to the side, focusing on nothing at all. “... Bellona’s safe. And Hydra was responsible for taking her out of prison. And she’s not going back to prison, because of how badly the prison guards failed... And you found her so easily.”

“Sometimes things work out for the best,” Daken said quietly.

“I suppose they do,” Laura said in a flat tone, still staring at nothing. “... Four guards died.”

“I couldn’t have hired Viper, Laura,” Daken said.
“You spared her life once. She might have owed you a favor,” Laura pointed out.

“I didn’t kill her because she was a messenger. She cleared herself of any debt to me by spreading word through the underworld not to fuck with me,” Daken said, shaking his head and stepping back to lean against the counter. “Besides, Viper was on the run from half the governments in the world. I couldn’t have met with her, and she wouldn’t have let an intermediary meet me on her behalf. She had too much pride and a grudging respect for me after seeing me in peak form with her own eyes.”

Laura considered that for a few moments and then nodded. “... It seems very convenient,” she murmured.

“Yes, but I’ve been here and behaving myself. My only two absences that would have been long enough to account for a clandestine meeting with an international terrorist are ones for which I am well documented to have been doing other foolish and impulsive things,” Daken replied.

“Okay.” Laura closed her eyes and nodded.

“I’m going to go change, and then I’ll leave you girls the room for a while.”

“Okay,” Laura said again, stepping out of the way.

Daken walked out and glanced at Gabby and Bellona on the couch, Gabby had calmed down a little and was sitting beside Bellona, still talking very quickly to her with a hint of a whine in her voice. Daken made his way to the bedroom, and shut the door softly behind him. He stripped out of his blood-soaked clothes, balling them up rather than risking the blood transferring to anything else in the hamper, then went to the dresser and pulled out soft, worn jeans and basic cotton undershirt and drawers. He forwent shoes and padded back out into the main room.

“Bellona,” he called and saw her tilt her head and turn her eyes up, looking away from Gabby momentarily to focus on him. “Gabby and Laura are going to help you with a bath. The young woman I spoke to earlier should be back soon with some clothes for you to wear. I’m going to step out for a while to give you some privacy.”

“... You’ll come back?” Bellona asked quietly.

“Yes,” Daken nodded.

She let her gaze fall again, giving a minute nod.

Momentarily satisfied with the state of things, Daken walked to the door and made his exit. As he moved down the hall, he could hear the sounds of commotion filling the school. The X-Men must be coming back and whipping the students into excitement. He was nearing the end of the staff dormitory corridor when he paused, scent hitting him a few seconds before its source appeared around the corner. Daken stayed where he was and waited for Drake to look up and notice him. When he finally did, Drake froze, non-literally, and stared at him for a second.

“Oh man, we are in so much trouble,” he said with a sigh. “Mostly meee.”

“Thank you,” Daken said. “You got yourself in trouble for my sister’s sake. Thank you.”

Drake stared again for a few more seconds, seeming lost and slightly alarmed, and then nodded. “Yeah. It’s... I mean, I think everybody kind of wishes you hadn’t killed five people, but... Bellona’s safe and stuff.”
Daken shrugged slightly. “It’s hard to feel remorse over Hydra,” he said, tilting his head and looking away. “They’re Nazis with a different color-scheme.”

“That’s... I mean, that’s some kind of point...” Drake cringed a little.

“You’re disgusted,” Daken said softly.

“... I don’t think I understand it enough to do any kind of judging here,” Drake said quietly, walking closer to him. “You’ve been deliberately desensitized to killing. The same thing happens to soldiers in a warzone... And we’re supposed to be keeping you out of warzones.”

“I’m not an addict. Not for this, anyway,” Daken said, turning to make Drake walk beside him. “Some people get addicted to killing, I’ve known several... But it doesn’t do anything for me.” He paused for a moment, eyes downcast as he walked back up the hall, now accompanied. “Sometimes somebody needs to die, for one reason or another, and making that happen is just a chore to be done. It’s taking out the garbage. Today it was more than that. Today I had someone to protect.”

“You did. You protected her,” Drake said, voice quiet and warm.

Daken reached without looking and caught his hand. Drake’s pulse doubled. Daken squeezed for a moment and then let go, letting his arm drop back to his side. They’d come parallel with the door to Drake’s suite and paused as he hesitated awkwardly. “... I need to talk to you,” Daken whispered, eyes still aimed down the empty hallway.

“... Okay,” Drake said and turned. He walked to his door and ran his finger across the scanner then opened it. Daken glided over as Drake stepped inside and held the door for him. After it closed, Daken stood still and quiet for a moment, staring straight ahead. “Are you okay?” Drake asked.

“... Laura asked me how I found her so quickly,” Daken murmured, not looking at him. “I told her the truth, that I’d received the information from one of my contacts in the underworld.” He took a breath. “But I didn’t tell her when.”

There was an elongated silence before Drake asked, “When?”

“Last night,” Daken whispered.

Another silence. “... Jesus Christ, Daken,” Drake hissed.

“I didn’t know she was going to hire Hydra!” Daken exclaimed, whipping around to look pleadingly at him. “I thought it would be some idiot super villains like the Sinister Six! And Purifiers? I don’t-- I-- Nineteen fucking Purifiers?!”

“Daken- Daken, calm down,” Drake said, putting his hands on Daken’s shoulders. “Tell me what you did.”

“Bellona was being held illegally. After SHIELD fell, all of the other people they’d been holding illegally got released, because it had been illegal,” Daken said in a hurried patter as a little bit of hysteria started digging its roots into him. “But not Bellona, because the US still hasn’t decided if we’re legally ‘people’ or not. They were holding her because of the ambiguous legal-standing of both mutants and clones. But if she escaped, then that would be a crime and then they could hold her legally, since they’d be sure to process her correctly this time. She had to be kidnapped! It was the only way to get her out of their hands so they couldn’t turn her into a weapon and a thing!”

“Calm down. Calm down,” Drake said, pulling Daken in and embracing him soothingly. Did he sound that strung out? Yes, he probably did.
“I told her to make it look credible, not to make it legitimately deadly,” Daken whined next to Drake’s shoulder. “Four people died in the extraction. She sent Hydra into a US federal facility and of course people died! She had to know that would happen! But she doesn’t give a damn if it’s ‘just humans’! The whole point of waiting so long was to do it carefully. People weren’t supposed to get killed. But apparently when I said ‘people’ she only heard ‘mutants’. And Purifiers? Was she hoping I was going to kill them to?! Well then she shouldn’t have sent so god damned MANY of them!"

“Who, Daken? ‘She’ who?” Bobby asked gently.

“... Raven,” Daken whined miserably.

Drake groaned. “Oh my God, Daken...”

Daken pulled away slightly to look at him. “She was the only one I knew who could pull it off without leaving a trail and wouldn’t roll on me!” Daken said desperately. “I just-- I didn’t know she was going to go completely overkill like that! I... I should have. I should have known.” He closed his eyes, feeling nauseous. “... I used to understand her. We used to be in synch.”

“Daken,” Drake’s voice was soft, not angry, just sad. “You’ve grown and she hasn’t.”

“Fantastic,” Daken sneered and tilted his head back, opening his eyes to look up at the ceiling and sighing. “I’ve grown just enough to make a complete and utter mess.” He bit his lip for a moment and then looked back at Drake. “... If this gets out, at all, Bellona goes back to prison, and there won’t be loopholes this time... And they’d be after me for conspiracy, maybe give me destruction of evidence and homicide for the Hydra scum... I didn’t even tell Laura. I’m not going to.”

“Why did you tell me?” Drake asked, staring at him.

Good question. He hadn’t planned to. And he hadn’t done either of them any favors. “... Because I’m an idiot, and I make bad decisions,” Daken whispered, looking away. Then he was pulled back in and held close. Daken stayed still for a moment, not breathing, not understanding, then he closed his eyes and drew a shuddering breath.

“... Daken... I don’t want Bellona to go back to prison... But you can’t do things like this. You can’t just decide to go rogue like this. You-- We should have gone to Jennifer in the first place,” Drake said quietly.

“You’ve been on the other side of the law before,” Daken pointed out. “Every time the US government decides that it’s illegal to have an X-gene.”

“That’s different.”

“No it’s not,” Daken protested. “The law isn’t there to protect us. Even when they’re not outright attacking us, the government doesn’t want us, and they’re happy to ignore the constitution because we’re not real citizens.”

“Well, I mean, you’re not a citizen at all,” Drake sighed, the attempted joke falling flat because he just sounded tired.

“Yes I am,” Daken retorted.

“You are?”

“Osborn built HAMMER on image, he didn’t want foreigners working for him,” Daken explained
quietly. “Ares and I both got fast-tracked citizenship and papers.”

Drake was quiet for a moment and then started snickering. “Wow.”

The little glimmer of amusement brought relief rushing in. Daken sighed and kissed Drake’s neck. He heard Drake’s pulse quicken and moved up, placing another kiss just slightly higher and working his way up toward Drake’s jaw.

“This is... um...” Drake mumbled uncertainty.

“I said I’d make it worth your while,” Daken murmured, nuzzling his ear. “We can take our time later, but if you want a quick sample now...”

“Worth my--?” Drake suddenly grabbed Daken’s shoulders and shoved him back, holding him at arm’s length. “No!”

Daken stared at him for a few seconds, startled. “No?”

“No! What the hell, man? Worth my while?” Drake demanded. “What do you think I--?”

Daken brought up his arms, knocking Drake’s hands away from him, and spun around.

“Daken, wait, I--” Drake called after him as Daken strode quickly to the door. “Let me explain,” he pleaded, giving chase.

“You were quite clear,” Daken replied in clipped monotone, pulling the door open.

Drake grabbed him by the shoulder. “No, I really think we’re having a misco--”

“Get. your. hand. off. of. me,” Daken growled dangerously, turning his head to glare.

“Daken--”

“You either need to back off, put me down, or prepare to bleed,” Daken hissed.

Drake took a step backwards, holding up his hands in surrender. “I’m not going to fight you,” he said quietly.

“Then back. off.”

Daken pushed through the door and into the hallway, and Drake’s footsteps didn’t follow this time. Anxious indecision made him falter for a moment, once he was in the open space. He couldn’t run to the sanctuary of his suite, the girls were in there. For a second or two he wondered whether Unity had gone home or returned to the school with the X-Men. No. It didn’t matter. He needed to stay away from Johnny. He didn’t even want that kind of action anymore now anyway. Rachel? No. Rachel would be with Pryde trying to untangle the mess of legal problems he’d dropped on them. Daken didn’t consider Logan for so much as a split-second.

He started walking in the opposite direction from his suite, mind still searching for options and rejecting them. He could climb out onto the roof, but he didn’t want to be in view, he didn’t want anyone looking at him. Daken was reaching the end of the staff dormitory hall, and starting to panic, when running steps caught his ears and he tensed up, biting his tongue and holding his breath a moment. Zach came barrelling around the corner, skidding on the turn as he adjusted course toward the staff dormitories. His face was pinched and upset as he turned, then his eyebrows lifted and his expression opened as he spotted Daken. Because Zach was the only one
who was ever just happy to see him. No reservations, no caveats, no wanting him to be better. The one person who believed Daken was good enough.

“Daken!” Zach nearly shouted, keeping his pace as he closed the distance. “Nga said that Chloe said that Mark said that Bridget said that Phoebe said you had another sister and she got kidnapped and she said that Dan said that Michaela said that she saw you carrying her and she’s here now!” He tried to kill his momentum and stop before he slammed into Daken, but Daken caught him and pulled him into a tight hug the moment he was in reach. “What is... What’s going on?” Zach whined in worried confusion.

“Everything’s fine,” Daken whispered.

“... Daken, what’s wrong?” Zach asked, tense with nervous energy but submitting to being hugged.

“Everything’s fine,” Daken repeated.

“... Maybe- Maybe we should go sit down,” Zach suggested, anxiety growing.

“Can’t go to my suite. The girls are giving Bellona a bath,” Daken muttered.

“Okay. Okay, that’s fine,” Zach said, squirming out of Daken’s arms and then catching him by the wrist to tow him. “It’s fine. Come on.”

Daken drifted along like a sleepwalker, barely hearing Zach’s voice as he continued to talk, not registering any of the words as his mind kept spiraling further into panic. He should turn around. Take Zach and Bellona and head for the airport. Get to Madripoor. Madripoor never extradited anyone. Why had he told Drake? A month of planning and he’d flushed it down the toilet in five minutes! Now Drake was going to tell Pryde and Pryde was going to tell the feds in some idiotic, vain attempt to endear the X-Men to a government that would inevitably turn on them for the fiftieth time in a year.

Zach was pushing the door to his dormitory open and tugging Daken inside. Daken still couldn’t seem to make the decision he knew he had to. He needed to get out of there, he needed to get Bellona out of there, before Drake told Pryde what he’d done and it was too late. He was sweating and trembling and his heart was pounding in his ears. Zach let go of him to close the door and Daken allowed his knees to buckle and then collapsed sideways and curled in on himself, gasping for air as he pulled his knees up to his forehead.

“Daken?” Zach’s voice called, nearly drown out by the volume of Daken’s pulse.

Bile was rising in his throat, uncomfortable heat in his eyes. His nose was congested suddenly, he pulled back his lips, teeth clenched in a sick snarl as he panted through them.

“Daken?” Zack was crouching beside him, panic in his voice. He was frightening Zach. He was a terrible parent. His child was upset, and it was his fault, and Daken couldn’t even get control of himself to reassure him. “I’ll- I’ll go get Professor Summers!” Zach decided, starting to stand back up.

“No!” Daken snapped through his teeth. Not Rachel. With as hysterical as he was right now, she’d probably see right through him. Even if Drake hadn’t already told Pride, Rachel would. She’d have to. She had to protect Pryde, and Daken had to protect his charges. “No...” he said again, in a quiet whimper this time.

“... Okay,” Zach said in a small, helpless voice, kneeling down next to his head. “What- What should I do?”
“Nothing,” Daken whispered and then bit his lip and balled up his hand, trying desperately to get hold of himself. He was shaking hard and air was painful in his lungs. “I fuck up everything,” he mumbled. “Always overreach. Always make everything worse.”

“No, that’s not true,” Zach said, putting his hand over the top of Daken’s. “You made things better for me. You’re the only good thing that ever happened to me.”

Daken squeezed his eyes shut. Zach’s words were like a deep cut down the wrist, pain and relief soaking through. “... I chose you,” Daken whispered. “The girls have my blood... Fate and mad-scientists made them my family... You, I chose.”

“... Yeah.” Zach’s hand squeezed tighter over Daken’s. His voice sounded warm, his scent was pleased now.

Daken opened his eyes but didn’t focus on anything, his vision blurrily aimed straight ahead of him. “... I targeted you at first because I needed your powers,” he mumbled. “I didn’t care about you.”

“But you changed your mind, because I’m so awesome,” Zach added helpfully.

“Yes,” Daken agreed, the corners of his lips tugging upward slightly. It was getting easier to breath and he was only trembling a little bit now.

Chapter End Notes

I was planning to post earlier, but oh my goodness, I have been so busy! New carpets were installed on Thursday morning, so last weekend and Wednesday were spent packing up all of my stuff into boxes and moving absolutely everything into the kitchen or the balcony, then after the installers left, moving everything back. I was so sore. And then I spent most of today driving around to pick up furniture I found on Craigslist. I have a sofa now! Yaaaay!

So one chapter left to go on the three parts of 'today'. And now I'm tired from all my running around and can't think of more to add to this note, so I'll call it good.
Logan orders noodles for everyone.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings:
- References to prostitution
- References to conditioning

“My shampoo smells nicer. It’s made of plants. I don’t know what this stuff is,” Gabby said as she scrubbed Daken’s shampoo into Bellona’s hair.

“I smell menthol,” Laura noted distractedly, leaning against the vanity.

“But why would they put that in shampoo?” Gabby demanded.

“I don’t--” Laura paused, turning her head as she heard somebody knocking on the suite’s main door. “That’s probably Hisako with the clothes,” she said, pushing away from the counter and pulling the door most of the way shut but leaving it ajar as she walked out into the main room.

“Daken, I really think we should talk about this. I’m sorry I snapped at you, but can I please just explain why? I feel like this is a whole dumb thing and it really shouldn’t be,” Bobby’s voice called through the door’s speaker.

Laura paused, confused for a moment and then worried. She turned and called over her shoulder, “Gabby, I’m just going to be out in the hall if you need me,” and then opened the door and stepped out. Bobby gave her a surprised look which turned quickly to guilty and embarrassed. “Daken’s not here,” Laura said.

Bobby’s lips formed a silent ‘oh’ as he glanced away. “W-where…?”

“I don’t know. He thought Bellona would like to have a bath, so he left us to help her and stepped out for a while,” Laura explained.

“… Right. Yeah. She spent half a day in a trunk. A hot bath is probably a good call,” Bobby mumbled, nodding.

“What happened?” Laura asked.

“It’s… I should just… I’ll find him later,” Bobby said awkwardly, not looking at her.

“Daken is complicated,” Laura said, and Bobby glanced at her for a moment. “I can help sometimes. I understand things about his reactions most people can’t. What happened?"

“It’s, um…” Bobby looked away again, flushing slightly, deeply uncomfortable.

“He does talk with me about his relationships and sexuality,” Laura noted. “I don’t have a frame of reference to know if that’s ‘normal’ for siblings, but I don’t think it’s embarrassing.”

Bobby pursed his lips and moved to the side, leaning his back against the wall next to the door and staring ahead at nothing. “… He made a pass at me… and I pushed him away,” he said very quietly
and then bit his lip for a moment, brow pinching. “It- It wasn’t because he made a pass, it was the
day he said it,” he added quickly, turning to glance at Laura again for a moment. “He… He said he
wanted to make it ‘worth my while’. Helping with the Purifiers… Like he wanted to pay me for it.”

Laura nodded slowly, taking a deep breath and sighing. “Daken is a prostitute,” she said.

Bobby turned his head again to stare at her, shock playing across his face, a hint of anger in his
scent. “That’s-- No. That’s not--”

“It’s part of his identity. It’s how he still sees himself,” Laura explained carefully. “He was
conditioned to think of his body and his sexuality as currency. Even if he’s gotten away from
actively exploiting himself in that capacity on a regular basis… It’s much easier to stop the action
than it is to stop the way of thinking. It is a facet of how Daken defines himself.”

“I can’t-- I can’t accept that,” Bobby said, turning his head to stare at the wall across from him.

“Good,” Laura said.

“… Good?”

“Good,” she repeated. “I think your reaction was valid and appropriate… If you accepted his
affections as payment, it would set an ugly and harmful precedent.”

Bobby bit his lip and dropped his gaze to the carpet, silent for a few moments. “… But he got
upset,” he whispered.

“Yes,” Laura sighed again. “Daken is irrationally sensitive to rejection.”

“But I wasn’t rejecting him,” Bobby protested.

“You were rejecting the context,” Laura nodded. “But that’s why I said that his sensitivity on this
subject gets irrational.”

“… What am I supposed to do?” Bobby asked, voice small and helpless.

Laura wet her lip and considered the question. “I think your instinct here was correct. Trying to talk
to him about it, to explain your reasons,” she said carefully and then paused for a moment. “But
even if your words get through… When I said that he sees himself as a prostitute, if you reject the
idea of him as one, he may still interpret that as you being unable to accept who he is, or judging
him for what Romulus made him.”

“So you’re saying there’s no winning here?” Bobby made a frustrated sound.

“I’m saying that you are probably going to have this conversation more than once,” Laura
corrected and then went quiet, studying him for a while, taking in his scent and listening to his
heart and lungs. “… You’re attracted to Daken, but do you care about him?” she asked.

“I… I can’t stop thinking about him,” Bobby whispered, closing his eyes. “So am I infatuated? Do
I have a crush? Is it more than that? I don’t know.”

Laura pursed her lips and gazed at nothing for a minute. “Please try to make yourself more certain
before you go any further,” she finally said. “If you attempted to casually explore your feelings
only to decide that they were not more… Daken isn’t the kind of person you can do that with. He
would not react well.”
Bobby closed his eyes and nodded. “Okay,” he said softly.

“But I do think that you should attempt to talk to him again, to explain your reaction,” Laura added. “He may only seem more offended, but the attempt does matter.” She took a step deeper into the hall to look around Bobby as she heard the approach of footsteps and spotted Hisako walking toward them with a Marshalls bag dangling from one hand.

“Laura!” Hisako called with a smile that was more polite than anything. “I brought clothes for… somebody.”

Bobby started at the sound of her voice, not having heard the footsteps coming, and glanced at her, the affectations of guilty embarrassment returning to his countenance.

“Thank you. Her name is Bellona,” Laura said with a acknowledging nod as Hisako closed the distance. She glanced at the door. “... I think I’ve locked myself out,” she noted, turning and lifting her hand to knock on it. “I hope Gabby--”

“I got it,” Bobby said, moving to press his thumb to the reader. “Lock override: Iceman.”

“Thank you,” Laura said again, pushing the door in a few inches as the bolt clicked back, then she paused, turning back toward Hisako, who held out the bag and a credit card.

“I guessed size four-ish?” Hisako said.

“Yes,” Laura agreed. She was, anyway, although the disturbing thinness that had taken Bellona since the last time Laura saw her would have any clothes that were long enough fitting very loosely.

“Do you need anything else?”

“This should be fine for now,” Laura said, looking into the bag. “Thank you, Hisako.”

“No problem. I- I hope Bellona’s okay,” Hisako replied, folding her hands and looking worried and awkward.

“So do I,” Laura nodded. “Thank you.” She started to step back into Daken’s room.

“Laura,” Bobby called softly. “If you see Daken before me, could you tell him… I just- I just wanted Bellona to be safe, and I still do, and I’d never do anything to jeopardize it.”

Laura pursed her lips, slightly disconcerted by the last part. “… Okay,” she agreed.

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It had been at least an hour and nobody had come looking for him. Daken was fairly certain that if anybody had actually been looking, the floor of Zach’s dormitory was not the sort of hiding place that would have had them stumped. Zach had been reluctant to let him leave, but had refused the invitation to come along and meet Bellona, and so Daken made his trek back to the staff wing alone. Nobody was confronting him in the hall. No feds were storming the school to arrest him. The walk was entirely uneventful.

When he reached his door, Daken opened it just a crack and called, “Laura?” Before there was a response, he caught Logan’s scent and wrinkled his nose, pushing the door open and stepping in. He spotted Bellona in the corner of the couch, clad in jeans and a tshirt, with Gabby at her side, Laura was leaning against the wall nearby, and Logan sitting on the corner of the coffee table to
face them. “Coffee tables are not for sitting on, Logan,” Daken said as Logan glanced at him over his shoulder.

“Y’ain’t got enough chairs,” Logan shrugged.

“I don’t entertain much.” Daken frowned down at him, crossing his arms. “That table is not designed to take a normal person’s weight, much less one filled with as much adamantium as you are.”

Logan sighed and rolled his eyes, getting up. “It’s just a damn table,” he muttered.

“It’s solid cherry, and it’s almost as old as you,” Daken retorted.

“Fine,” Logan said. “Get more chairs.”

“The room is fine as it is. I do not have the space to clutter it up with unnecessary furniture and I don’t entertain here,” Daken pointed out again.

“Stop it. Both of you. This is a stupid argument,” Laura interjected.

Daken obeyed and turned his attention to Bellona, walking over and crouching in front of her. “Bellona, you should try to eat. Is there anything that you’d like?” he asked softly.

“I already ordered a bunch of some chicken thing Gabby wanted,” Logan said. “Should be here soon.”

“Good,” Daken nodded. “Did the bath help?”

Bellona considered the question for a moment and then nodded.

“I’m glad,” Daken smiled at her.

“Daken,” Laura said, pushing herself away from the wall and walking toward the door. “I need a quick word.”

Daken pursed his lips and nodded, standing back up. He pointed at Logan. “Do not sit on that coffee table,” he ordered before following Laura into the hall. He glanced up and down and listened as he pulled the door shut behind him, affirming that the hall was deserted, then turned to Laura. “Yes?”

“Bobby came by while you were gone,” Laura said and Daken’s stomach clenched. “He was worried that he’d hurt your feelings. He wanted to talk to you about it… And he wanted you to know that he wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize Bellona’s safety.” She frowned up at him.

Daken was quiet for a moment, lips pursed, and then nodded.

“Why would you be worrying about him jeopardizing Bellona’s safety?” Laura asked.

“... Telling Pryde not to keep her,” Daken said softly, looking away. “He was… upset about what I did to the Hydra cell that was delivering her. He seemed to feel that my capacity for decision-making has been affected by all of this… There was some mention of keeping her elsewhere. But keeping her somewhere safe and contained and away from the people who care about her is how she ended up in her current state.”

Laura sighed and looked away. “Okay,” she said. Daken wasn’t sure if she was accepting the answer or giving up on getting a real one.
“Laura.” They both turned to see Jubilee walking up the hallway with a full plastic bag in each hand. “An Uber just dropped off soooo many noodles!”

“Thank you,” Laura replied with a nod.

“So can I meet her?” Jubilee asked.

“You realize I don’t have a family-sized suite, right?” Daken sighed irritably.

“I love you, cranky big brother,” Jubilee replied with a smirk, handing him one of the bags.

Daken rolled his eyes. “Do not sit on the coffee table.”

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Gabby had calmed down somewhat, after chattering her way through dozens of topics, repeating herself several times, and coming to tears more than once. Now she had gone relatively quiet, leaned against Bellona’s side on the couch, as Laura’s father crouched in front of them speaking gently. At first he’d tried asking her questions but soon given up on that and shifted to giving reassurances about protection and ‘help’. He was like Laura, a hero, believing the things that heroes believed. Believing the world could be made simple. Believing that there was such a thing as ‘right’. And if there was ‘right’, then everything else must be ‘wrong’.

Daken was different. And Laura had taken him out again the moment he’d come back, because she knew he was different than her, knew that the results of Bellona’s abduction had been too perfect. Because he didn’t believe in a benevolent universe, he believed in himself. He neither left things to chance nor left them to languish. He was like Bellona, he didn’t hope. He wasn’t like Bellona, he was more precise, more driven. He was fascinating. Was Laura sending him away? She suspected he’d done something, but did she know? No, he wasn’t so sloppy. Would Laura keep him away? No, this was his space; every inch of it graced by his compelling scent that intrigued and baffled the senses.

“Darlin’?” Logan’s voice called, painted with concern. “What’s wrong?”

She’d been staring at the door too long. Bellona licked her bottom lip and whispered, “Daken.”

“He’ll be back in a minute,” Logan assured her.

“He feels nice to be near, huh?” Gabby noted, tilting her head back next to Bellona’s shoulder to look up at her. “Except when he gets super upset, then it’s really hard.”

Bellona nodded. “… He’s like me?” she asked, glancing at Logan.

He frowned, radiating confusion and unease. “He’s been through the ringer like you. Bounced back and forth between a few bad people and bad places. And…” he paused, considering for a moment. “And he didn’t get help when he should’ve. Yeah, he’s like you.”

She heard the bolt and the door opened again, Daken reappearing with a plastic bag in one hand and walking into the room followed by Laura and another woman. “Yes!” Gabby exclaimed. “These are the very best noodles, Bellona!” Gabby said for more than the fifth time since the subject of food had come up, as Daken set the bag down on the coffee table and crouched in front of the fridge hidden in the end-table.

“Bellona,” he murmured as he held another bottle of the thick, milky drink out to her. Bellona reached and took it, then stared down at the bottle as Daken kept rummaging in the small fridge
with the sound of glass clinking. He held a short, dark bottle up and Gabby reached across Bellona to take it. “Jubilee, do you want a ginger beer or a cider?” he asked.

“Ginger beer, please,” the new woman replied and then, having put a second bag of food down on the table, turned and smiled at Bellona. “Hi, I’m Jubilee. Adjunct family,” she said, holding out her hand. Bellona looked at the hand. She’d seen that gesture a few times, from a distance. She hesitantly shifted the bottle Daken had given her to her left hand and reached back, clasping Jubilee’s fingers for a moment before withdrawing again. There were strange scents clinging to her. Something like a human but odd. Milk and rice and carrots not on her breath but splattered in tiny specks upon her.

“What’s Bellona drinking?” Gabby asked, leaning over to look at the bottle.

“High-protein nutrition shake. To help her put some weight back on,” Daken replied, closing the fridge and twisting without standing up. He had two more of the short, dark bottles in one hand and taller, golden ones in another. He set three down on the coffee table and held one of the taller bottles out to Logan, before shifting again to be in front of Bellona. “I know it may feel like you don’t want to eat right now, but you need to force yourself for a little while until your body understands.”

Bellona pursed her lips for a moment and nodded. She could tell that he understood the disgusted malaise she felt at the thought of eating.

“They make cider out of pears?” Logan asked, examining the bottle Daken had given him.

“They make cider from anything that comes from an orchard,” Daken replied, rising to his feet, then he narrowed his eyes as Logan partially unsheathed a claw. “Wait. I have a churchkey.”

“I’m good.”

“No,” Daken said, voice sharpening slightly as he picked up a small tool off the top of the end table and held it out to Logan. “I do not want micro shards of glass on my floor.”

Logan sighed, withdrawing his claw and accepted the implement. “I know how to open a bottle without breaking it,” he grumbled as he pried the lid off his bottle with the tool, the gesture looking clumsy and unpracticed.

Daken didn’t respond, disappearing into the back room for a few moments and reappearing with a chair and a stool. “Jubilee,” he said, setting the chair down and then offering the stool to Logan, before turning back to Bellona. He picked up one of the white boxes of food out of the bag, handing it to her, and asked, “Do you prefer a fork?”

Bellona frowned slightly, confused by the question.

“The restaurant sent forks and chopsticks,” he explained, holding up a plastic fork and something long and thin with a paper wrapper around it. “If you’ve never used chopsticks before, I wouldn’t recommend trying to learn in the already awkward position of not having a table.”

She nodded, reaching out to take the plastic fork from him. Daken dropped down and settled himself on the floor next to her feet. Bellona looked down at the top of his head. Daken’s gaze was turned straight ahead of him, not looking at anything.

“Rules of decorum dictate that I should ask if you feel better,” he noted quietly. “However I do not understand what could be ‘polite’ about pressing you to respond in the ‘appropriate’ way. Decorum is a dance of ‘white’ lies. While the bath likely made you more physically comfortable, I don’t
expect you’ll feel genuinely ‘better’ for some time, and you are not obliged to pretend for the social-comfort of those around you.”

“Daken,” Logan said through an irritated sigh. “Knock that off. She don’t need you fillin’ her up with cynical bullshit.”

“No, he has a good point,” Laura cut in. “It will make people uncomfortable when you don’t smile and tell them you’re fine. And if they already see you as dangerous, they think that not being fine is some kind of ‘warning sign’.” She shook her head and picked up one of the boxes of food and one of the ‘chopsticks’ packets. “Bellona has the right to take the time she needs. She shouldn’t have to smile for anybody else.”

“Nobody’s gonna tell her she has to be a damn cheerleader,” Logan said.

“Wrong. Girls and women are required to smile,” Daken retorted, picking up one of the boxes for himself. “It’s an expectation pushed upon them, something they’re taught to do, regardless of how they feel, from an early age. And since everybody’s taught just the same that girls must smile, girls who refuse to do so are perceived defective in some way. Bitches.”

“Now I want to see Daken teach a women’s studies class,” Jubilee noted with an amused grin.

“Just like ‘quiet’ boys and men are ‘creeps’,,” Daken murmured, opening his box of noodles. “Subversion of the culture’s gender-specific behavioral expectations is judged quite harshly.”

Gabby put the box of food she’d already started eating back down on the coffee table and twisted to wrap her arms around Bellona. “It’s nice here and the people are nice and the rooms are nice and the food is nice. Everything’s a million times better than it was, and I think you’ll feel better, but you don’t have to be okay until you’re really okay, okay?”

Bellona leaned her cheek on Gabby’s head and closed her eyes.
There was light coming through the crevices in the overlapping window blinds, growing stronger as time ticked by. Bellona lay on her side in the bed, staring around at the room she had been informed was hers. There was a small table next to the bed, and a desk, a chair, and a tall piece of furniture to store clothing in. The bed was softer and warmer than anywhere she had slept before. The light bleeding through the blinds had changed from gray to yellow when there was a rapping on the door.

“Bellona?” Daken’s voice, filtered through electronics, followed the sound. “Say ‘open’ out loud, please.”

Bellona pulled her legs under her and sat up. “Open,” she called.

She heard a click inside the door, and then it opened and Daken stepped into the room. He smiled at her and shut the door behind him, then walked over and sat on the foot of her bed. “Did you sleep soundly?” he asked.

She tilted her head and shrugged slightly. She’d woken several times, but slept enough overall, and more comfortably than she usually did.

“I’ve sent a mass-text to my students that I’m canceling my classes today due to my family emergency.” Daken said softly. “You’re going to need some basic necessities to get by, and as nice as it was for Ichiki to pick up the things for you yesterday, I think you should have some style input for the rest. And maybe start the day with a five-star breakfast.”

Bellona frowned slightly as she processed that. “I thought I wasn’t supposed to leave this building?” she asked.

“Your days of being a slave and prisoner are over,” Daken replied, reaching out to stroke her hair. “Pryde would probably rather wait for the paperwork to all be stamped, but she’s still asleep now.”

She considered, nibbling on her lip for a moment. “This won’t... void my freedom?”

“This is your freedom,” Daken said with a fierce smile. “If you don’t act like a free human being, people aren’t going to treat you like one.”

Bellona nodded slowly, not sure his logic was entirely realistic, but it was a linear and cohesive logic still. And she’d seen how formidably her brother made his will reality. He was strong. Strength without cruelty. In the face of cruelty. He was like Zelda. “... I trust you,” Bellona whispered.

Daken’s smile softened and he stroked her hair one more time before standing up. “I’ll wait in the hall while you change,” he said.

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“So did your boy get that fifty thousand dollar piece of paper?” Kitty asked.

“Yep. He sounded pretty excited, I think he’s really into this,” Dani said with a nod, settling down
into the chair in front of Kitty’s desk. “Jubilee says she’ll cover my class while I pick him up, so I’m thinking a staff meeting Wednesday afternoon to do introductions?”

“Sounds good,” Kitty nodded and then sighed. “I trust your judgement because nobody herds cats like you, but I’ve got this bad little voice in the back of my head that keeps saying ‘why can’t we get a counselor who’s one of our people?’ She leaned her elbows on the desk and her face in her hands. “Is that racist? I’m being racist, aren’t I?”

“Cliquey, anyway,” Dani suggested with a shrug. “I think the list of psychologists who are both certified and mutants is down to just Emma at this point. Anyway, Terry’s not really one of anybody’s ‘people’, and it seems like more than a few people-who-don’t-have-people end up X-Men.”

“That’s a valid point,” Kitty nodded. “Lord knows Longshot and Warbird pulled their weight.”

“I don’t want to make a joke about cold feet because of ‘too soon’, but seriously Kitty, we’ve not only already committed to this, it’s also—” Dani turned as the door opened and Rachel stepped into the office. “It’s also just the best option right now.”

“What’s wrong?” Kitty asked, seeing tension in Rachel’s face and shoulders.

“Bellona’s gone. So’s Daken,” Rachel said.

“Are you-- Are you fucking kidding me? Oh my-- Nnnnngh! What!” Kitty slapped her hands against the desk and kicked her feet in anxious frustration. “What the hell!”

“I found Daken’s chip on his bathroom counter, he must have cut it out last night, and his cell is going straight to voicemail,” Rachel added, pacing.

“Okay. Okay. So we send Logan after them and-- did Laura spend the night here? We need all our trackers out there while the trail’s still hot.”

“No. Zach showed up for biology this morning,” Rachel shook her head. “If he’s here, then Daken’s planning on coming back.”

“Carol told us not to let her leave campus!” Kitty exclaimed. “If we don’t get everybody on finding her right away--”

“The fact that she’s already off campus is a lot more likely to get noticed if we send a dozen X-Men out to comb the city,” Rachel cut her off. “Daken may think the law doesn’t apply to him, but he’s very good at not getting caught.”

“So we just wait around and hope he wanders back in?” Kitty demanded.

“He will wander in. He wouldn’t leave Zach behind if he was running,” Rachel said firmly.

“Jennifer’s going to be here in an hour!” Kitty snapped back.

“And Daken knows that,” Rachel said. “Kitty, I’m just keeping you updated, I’m not trying to panic you. The fact that Zach is in class means that we do not need to panic,” she shifted her tone, attempting to be soothing. “Now I’m going to go set up in Cerebra and try to find him. Don’t panic.”

“Panicking is my job now!” Kitty threw her hands in the air.
“Daken?” Bellona’s voice called from the fitting room.

“Is something wrong?” Daken called back.

The door opened and Bellona appeared in a navy romper. “There is a woman talking into my mind,” she said, looking unhappy about it.

[What the hell were you thinking?] Rachel’s ‘voice’ demanded suddenly, apparently able to get a grip on Daken’s mind once Bellona had pointed him out for her.

_That Bellona needed more than a single change of clothing_, Daken thought back. “Thank you, Bellona. Do you like the romper?”

[We promised Carol we’d keep her on campus until her legal status was sorted out,] Rachel reminded him.

“It doesn’t restrict my mobility. I like that,” Bellona answered, looking down at herself.

_I didn’t_, Daken replied. “That is valuable. Women’s fashion the past few years has had a pretty good selection of active-lifestyle designs. I understand that the lack of pockets is a common annoyance, but if you did need to run or fight, a pouch belt or harness would be more secure anyway.”

[You need to get her back here. Now.] Rachel ordered. [Jennifer’s on the way here to meet her.]

“It will be too cold when the weather changes,” Bellona noted.

_We’re six blocks away and our appointment with Miss Walters isn’t for another forty minutes_, Daken retorted. “No, you’ll have a different wardrobe for the cold weather.”

[Get. her. back. here. now.]

“How many different outfits do I have to have?” Bellona frowned skeptically at him.

_We’ll pay and head back._ Daken smirked and tilted his head to the side. “During La Belle Epoch, a society woman would wear four or five different dresses every day,” he said. “A hundred years later, it’s a faux pas for a woman to wear the same outfit twice in a week, and in general she shouldn’t be wearing the exact same lineup each and every week either.”

Bellona pursed her lips, looking a bit annoyed at the prospect. “You said that’s for women? Is it different for men?”

“For men it depends almost entirely on the setting where they work, but yes, their outfits aren’t required to look significantly different. Even a high-earner, assuming they’re not in the fashion or entertainment industry, can get away with wearing the same color every day,” Daken shrugged and shook his head. “But this is the last stop for today, you have an appointment with your lawyer.” He reached out and caught her hand for a moment, giving it a squeeze. “Give me what you liked and I’ll check out while you change.”

“Okay,” Bellona agreed, going back into the changing room.

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“Jennifer,” Logan said with a nod as the towering woman climbed out of her Uber in front of the
school. “I appreciate your time.”

“I’m just sorry I couldn’t get here yesterday,” Jennifer said, straightening up and offering him a hand to shake.

“Nah. Gave her some time to calm down and settle a bit,” Logan replied, shaking her hand.

“That’s good,” Jennifer nodded, walking with him up the steps. “You think she’ll be ready to talk to me today?”

“You’re a little early, don’t think she’s waiting on you, but she’ll be along in a minute,” Logan shrugged slightly. The breeze was coming from the north today, and it brought with it two familiar scents, close by. “Headin’ for Kitty’s office, I think.”

“It seems like I’ve been spending a lot of time in that room lately, and always because of somebody with retractable claws and an attitude problem,” Jennifer chuckled.

“And I suppose you want to blame me for that,” Logan smirked.

As they neared Kitty’s office, she came running along the balcony to meet them in front of it. “Hi, Jen! Listen, um, so, yeah, you’re a little early. Um, Bellona’s-- We’re--”

“She’s on her way up,” Logan supplied calmly. “Smelled her comin’.”

“Oh thank God,” Kitty sighed, squeezing her eyes shut and shaking her head.

“Oookay. As her lawyer, I’m just going to assume everybody remembered that it was agreed Bellona shouldn’t leave campus until her legal status was established,” Jennifer announced. “So, let’s just sit down and wait for her to catch up from whatever on-campus location she is at.”

“Yeah. That’s good,” Kitty nodded quickly. “I thought we should do the conference room, since this is turning into a whole thing.”

“A whole thing, huh?” Jennifer asked, raising an eyebrow but turning to follow as Kitty lead the way toward the conference room.

“A family thing,” Logan clarified with a shrug.

“Okay, for introductions at least, if that’ll make Bellona more comfortable,” Jennifer agreed. “I may want to talk to her alone at some point too.”

“Whatever you need,” Logan nodded.

Laura and Gabby were already in the conference room when they got there and Gabby hopped out of a chair she’d been spinning around to greet Jennifer with a big smile. “Hi Best-Hulk! Thank you for helping my big-brother last time and thank you for helping my big-sister this time!”

Jennifer put her hands on Gabby’s shoulders and gave her the most serious look. “Gabby, there’s something very important I need you to do.”

Gabby’s eyes got round. “What?”

“I need you to start me trending as ‘hashtag Best-Hulk’,” Jennifer said gravely. “Amadeus will try to stop you. Be strong.”

“You can count on me!” Gabby declared fiercely.
“There’s no doubt in my mind,” Jennifer gave her a grin and a sharp nod.

“Thank you for this, Jennifer,” Laura said quietly, as Gabby got back into the chair next to her and Logan walked around to one of the chairs facing them, keeping them bunched up at one end of the long table.

Jennifer sighed softly, sitting down at the conference table. “It’s not going to be easy or fast, you understand that, right?” she said, looking up at Laura. “Bellona didn’t receive due process, which works in her favor. Many of the people who were being held under War on Terror protocols were simply released when SHIELD folded, due to civil rights violations. But the people who were simply let out didn’t have body-counts.”

“I understand,” Laura nodded.

Kitty finally settled in and Jennifer had arranged a small computer and some files on the table when the door opened and Rachel walked in, followed by Bellona and Daken. Logan let out a chuckle and shook his head as he caught sight of Bellona in a dark pink-red dress and matching sun-hat, Jackie-O sunglasses perched upon her face. Unmistakably Daken’s work.

Jennifer raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t realize I’d be representing Miz Hepburn,” she noted.

Daken scoffed. “The iconic hat and dress from Breakfast at Tiffany’s were black,” he replied, as if stating that the Earth was round. “Cerise compliments Bellona’s natural palate. And the sun-protection is just practical.”

“You’re buyin’ her a wardrobe she can wear for, what, a week or two, before she puts some weight back on?” Logan asked skeptically.

“I know Laura’s dress-size and am willing to assume Bellona’s is roughly similar,” Daken retorted, walking around to his side of the table. “I had the tailor put a couple bastes in the back to cinch it in for today.” He pulled out the chair next to Logan and across from Jennifer and nodded to it while holding eye-contact with Bellona. She shifted, her body-language tightening and her scent going nervous at the treatment as she sat in the offered chair and let herself be pushed in. Daken then sank into the chair on her other side and folded his hands on the table. “Thank you for coming on short notice, Miss Walters.”

“Maybe hold off on thanking me until we figure out how we’re going to handle this,” Jennifer said, pushing her computer slightly to the side.

“I understand you were Laura’s legal council when her own responsibility for what the Facility made her do was brought into question,” Daken said calmly.

Jennifer nodded. “I’ve been the X-Men’s legal council since before they went public,” she replied, this time her scent matched the serious look on her face. “And I’m afraid this situation is different. Laura was twelve when the Facility was using her to preform assassinations. The lowest bar for trial as an adult is 14, and that’s rare.”

Daken kept Jennifer’s eyes as he asked, “Bellona, how old are you?”

“... I don’t know,” Bellona whispered.

“When did you know were the property of Alchemax?” he asked.

“My entire life.”
“Yeah, the guards had it embroidered right onto their uniforms,” Gabby added. “Not a super great idea if you’re trying to keep your company’s crimes against nature and humanity a secret.”

“... I see,” Jennifer said softly.

“Alchemax was formed five years ago,” Daken said, still staring right back into Jennifer’s face. “Before that, it would have been ‘Oscorp’.”

“Yes, I caught that,” Jennifer agreed and looked down with a sigh, folding her arms on the table and leaning into them. “... To work from that angle, we’re going to need proof of when she was... un-tubed or whatever the process. But since Alchemax denies all knowledge of any cloning operations, I don’t think they’re going to be cooperative.”

“Can you give me a week?” Daken asked.

Jennifer worked her jaw and looked at him hard for a minute. “I’m sure you wouldn’t be planning on doing anything illegal with that time,” she said.

“Of course not.”

“And there had better not be any more bodies hitting the floor.”

“I can’t imagine why there would.”

She pursed her lips and took a deep breath through her nose. “I think Carol and I can keep this plate spinning for a week,” she said. “But to make the legal claim of Bellona being a five year old, she’ll have to have a legal guardian.”

“That’s easy en--”

“Give me the papers. I’ll sign ‘em,” Logan cut in. Daken turned sharply to stare at him, suddenly silent, anger in his eyes and playing in his scent. “Try my damnedest to do right here, and pray that Kitty and the school can fill in for my shortcomin’s.”

“I’ll fill the custody forms out here and run them off Kitty’s printer for you to sign,” Jennifer said, rolling right along as she pulled her computer back in front of her. “And just to be perfectly clear, Bellona will be staying on campus until we’ve finished getting her absolved of responsibility for Daylesville massacre.”

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Daken lay on the floor of his suite, glaring at the ceiling and trembling. He had no argument to make. Logan had a stronger legal claim. Unless they could be legally declared ‘unfit’, a parent always had the strongest claim. Logan was an unfit parent, Daken knew that better than anyone. But Bellona was a girl. Logan usually did well enough with girls. He wouldn’t drown a girl like a sack of kittens, at the least. Laura admitted their father’s faults but still very much loved him. Bellona wasn’t in danger from Logan. Maybe he’d even stay for her. No. He wasn’t jealous. He was angry. Daken had done everything to buy Bellona’s freedom. This was his plan. His achievement. And Logan had hijacked it at the last minute.

There was a knock on the door, a familiar cadence to it. “Daken?”

Daken didn’t move, just narrowed his eyes slightly to glare with more fire at the innocent ceiling above him.
Another knock. “Daken, open the door.” After another minute passed without response, Logan’s voice called, “Damn it, Kid, ya ain’t foolin’ anyone. Let me in. I need to talk to you.”

Daken turned his head and shifted his glare from the ceiling to the door.

“Daken-—”

“Open,” Daken growled.

The door unlatched and pushed open, Logan stepped into view and looked down at him. He shut the door softly behind him before kneeling down next to Daken. “So you’re mad.”

“Did you think I had to leave the room because I needed a toilet?”

“Nah, thought I might find you beatin’ the tar out of yourself or somebody else,” Logan replied. He sighed deeply and shook his head. “You were plannin’ on signing the custody papers yourself, right? You had it all worked out before you stepped into the room. Hardly even needed a lawyer, did ya?”

“Yes. I had a plan,” Daken hissed.

“Your plan include what you were gonna tell Zach?” Logan asked, and Daken was slightly thrown off, it wasn’t a question he’d been expecting. “You know him better than me or anyone. So tell me: if you’d signed those papers for Bellona, how would that make him feel?”

Daken turned his head and looked away, stomach clenching.

“That kid means a lot to you, and you mean a lot to him,” Logan said quietly. “Bell was your sister this mornin’ and she’s your sister now. And Zach still gets to tell himself he’s special. Just because I’m the one signin’ her permission-slips don’t mean Bell needs you any less. She obviously loves you already, was pretty upset you left.”

“And how upset will she be when you leave? Back to hunt your ghosts?” Daken whispered, eyes fixed on the leg of the couch.

Logan heaved another sigh. “Gonna talk to Kitty about maybe havin’ one of the ‘porters give me lifts home and back out into it. Be able to be here more.”

“... Right. You’d do that for a ‘Darlin’, wouldn’t you.”

Logan was quiet for a minute, then he moved slowly and laid a hand against Daken’s shoulder. “You need more time from me?” he asked.

“No,” Daken said, and then, “Yes.” He rolled onto his side, away from the touch, put his back to Logan, and curled in on himself. “No.”

“... I’m sorry,” Logan whispered. “... I’m so proud of you for still bein’ here. For tryin’ so hard... Rachel says you’re a damn fine teacher. I’m not surprised. I knew you were smart. Too smart for me to ever keep up with you... I’m so damn proud of you.”

“... Shut up,” Daken forced out through the constriction in his throat. He swallowed against the feeling and against nausea.

“I don’t know what you need from me, Daken. I’ve never been able to read you right,” Logan said softly. “I want to help you. I need to get the Soiteria bastards out of commission because that’s
about protectin’ you and the girls as much as everyone else. But I want to help you with your thing, I just don’t have a clue how... I don’t know how to undo the things he did to you.”

“Always... want to undo it... take back your mistake,” Daken choked, squeezing his eyes shut. “Unmake me.”

“I don’t want to ‘unmake’ you, Daken, I’m tryin’ to figure out what I can do to help you stop hurtin’,” Logan said.

“I want to hurt.”

“... I’m sorry,” Logan said, voice small and broken. “I don’t know what to do with that. I don’t know how to help. Bringin’ you to the people who helped me, hoping they can figure it out, it’s the best I know how to do.”

Daken shuddered and pulled his arms tighter against himself. “... Daddy?”

“Yeah?”

He swallowed and drew a difficult breath through his teeth. “Stay here for a while?”

“Okay,” Logan agreed quietly. “... You want me to say anything, or just sit?”

“... Tell me about my mother?”

“Where to start. She was amazin’,” Logan said, scooting closer and putting a hand on Daken’s shoulder again. “She had this kind of quiet pride. She wasn’t haughty or like that, just this perfect dignity, like the first flowers in spring comin’ up, bold but silent, right out of the snow.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry that I've been slow to respond the last few weeks. It's a bad winter, it's a bad year, but I'm fine and I spent my weekend getting back on top of things, trying to get the ball rolling again. Optimism plus making myself busy with projects that I am optimistic about, getting shit done and moving forward. Thanks to those who have been so encouraging lately, and here's to forward momentum on into the new year. Writing means a lot to me, I put a lot that I'm working through into my writing and had a lot of talks with my therapist where she encouraged me to write write write. So no matter what else is going on with me, I'm going to try and keep writing as much as I can.
Important conversations are had.

Daken was waiting outside the classroom when English class ended and Zach’s steps faltered slightly before stepping out of traffic and toward him. He looked not-right. That, combined with the fact that the last time Daken had waited outside his class it had been for their brief trip to Madripoor, had Zach worried. Yesterday had been intense and surreal on too many levels, but Daken’s breakdown had been a little more than Zach could even process. Now he looked pale and tired. “Don’t- Don’t you have a class right now?” Zach asked.

“Canceled everything this morning. The legal things are buttoned up for now, but I expect my students are already making use of their early afternoon,” Daken answered and put his arm around Zach’s shoulders, pulling him along as he started walking. “What would be better? Ice cream, crepes, mini-donuts from that automatic-donut-carousel you found so charming?”

“Crepes can have ice cream. Two birds,” Zach suggested, feeling simultaneously hopeful and more nervous.

“That is solid strategic thinking, Zach,” Daken said, his voice warm.

Zach relaxed and leaned into him. “So, what’s- what’s going on with your new sister?”

“We’re going to get her legally declared as her chronological age,” Daken replied. “She and Gabby were rapid-aged to varying degrees. We’re not sure right now exactly how old she is, so the date for her creation is something I’m going to need to get hold of. I know people who are good at finding difficult-to-find information.”

“Cool... Is she staying here?” Zach asked, looking up.

“Yes. If she’s legally a minor, then she needs a parent. Logan will have to do,” Daken nodded and then looked down at Zach. “However, Logan has a strong tendency to make commitments and then wander off. Bellona is going to need more support.”

“... Uhuh.” Zach glanced away, feeling sick and jealous.

“You’re under no obligation, of course, you have no responsibility in any of this, but I was hoping maybe you could help sometimes?” Daken asked.

Zach blinked in surprise and up at him again. “Help?”

“Nothing big, I wouldn’t presume to burden you,” Daken said quickly, shaking his head. “Just, when you’re around her, try to notice her demeanor. She’s demonstrated some fairly concerning depression and anxiety indicators. If you take note of any behavior that worries you, will you please tell me?”

Zach nodded. “Yeah. Sure.”

“And maybe you could tolerate her to tag along on outings sometimes?” Daken added. “Not all the time, but I want her to feel like she’s part of our family.”

Zach ran those words through his head twice. Daken needed him to help make Bellona feel like
part of their family. Their family. Zach sucked in his bottom lip and bit down on it a little bit. He fought against the impulse to reach for a hug, because there were a few dozen kids in the hall and Zach was way too cool for that. “W-where is she now?” he asked instead, walking with a bit more bounce as he felt simultaneously lighter and heavier.

“Spending some time with Logan,” Daken replied. “She only met him yesterday, and as of a few hours ago he’s legally her father.” He shrugged and wrinkled his nose slightly. “Laura and Gabby are there too, so he may not botch it too badly.”

Zach considered that as they walked down the steps and toward the park. “He seemed okay at the dinner-thing, but he’s pretty much a jerk, right?”

“... It’s complicated,” Daken sighed. “He’s ashamed of parts of himself, and with people who mirror him, superficially or existentially, he’ll see the things he hates in himself.”

Zach chewed on his lip, processing how ‘superficial’ and ‘existential’ similarities might be defined and quantified as they walked toward the transverse, before looking back up at Daken and asking, “Are you worried about him hurting Bellona?”

Daken met his eyes for a moment, and his expression was unreadable. “... He’ll probably say something harmful now and again, apparently he said some things he shouldn’t have to Laura when she was younger... But I don’t think he’d physically hurt a girl. And Bellona’s going to have a better support-network than Laura had.”

Zach nodded and went quiet for a while, not sure how to follow up on that, as they emerged from the park and into the city. Just as the silence was turning truly uncomfortable, Daken started asking him about his classes and Zach fell into a long and detailed complaint on an argument the Tengus’ started in literature.

“I believe the point of discussing the books in class is to compare alternate interpretations,” Daken noted, slowing as they reached the creperie and holding the door for Zach. “In some cases, the question of what the author meant may be relevant to the conversation, but it’s never the only thing that matters. Sometimes an author may accidentally convey a message they didn’t intend, maybe because they were speaking from an extremely localized point of view and the larger majority has a different one.”

“No, no, see, they were getting all dumb about the slavery thing! And we kept saying-- the teacher kept telling them-- that Mark Twain was anti-slavery and they weren’t getting it,” Zach protested, getting into the short line at the counter.

“Satire rarely translates well between cultures, and western-style satire especially does not translate to Japanese audiences because the convention of speaking facetiously to emphasize a point isn’t really used there,” Daken explained, hooking his thumbs in the corners of his pockets and standing in a relaxed posture that might have looked slouchy on anyone else. “So they don’t have much sense of sarcasm and their satire usually over-emphasizes rather than counter-emphasizing. They can understand conceptually how western satire works, and they’ve been here a couple year so they’ll probably pick up on more obvious examples of it, but Huckleberry Finn is a pretty deep cut.”

Zach pushed out an unhappy sigh, annoyed that Daken was being so sensible.

“You’re still having difficulty with the Tengus?” Daken asked, and Zach could tell he thought it was funny.
“Karasu is okay on her own, but when Sojobo starts being all dumb, she always backs him up,” Zach complained.

“So they may have some antisocial tendencies because of the way they were raised?” Daken asked.

Zach took a breath to respond and then stopped and pursed his lips, sensing a trap.

Once they had their crepes, they settled at the counter against the front window, facing out onto the street. Zach abandoned the previous topic of conversation and began questioning whether anyone ever actually used algebra outside of a classroom.

“The simplest parts of it, yes,” Daken nodded, cutting a square out of his savory crepe. “In general though, the average adult can probably count on one hand the number of algebraic equations they have ready recall on.”

“See! That’s my point! I’m never going to use this!” Zach huffed and bit off a piece from the edge of his crepe that had been wrapped into a cone.

“Not exactly,” Daken shook his head. “High school algebra isn’t focused on learning the equations themselves, it’s focused on learning the *process* for solving them. It’s useful to know the process, the hierarchy of symbols and the order in which to address them. In the days of Google now, if you ever run into a situation where algebra would be useful, you can always Google whatever equation you need, but if you don’t know the *process* to solve it, then the equation will be useless.”

“But- but what would I even *need* it for?” Zach protested.

Daken shrugged. “Who knows. There’s some situations in which it’s useful. And Googling a basic equation format takes a few seconds, whereas trying to find somebody to do it *for* you takes quite a bit longer. I prefer to be self-reliant.”

“Self-reliant? One should never be afraid to ask for help though, should they?” A woman with brown hair pulled back in a chopstick-bun put her hands on Daken’s chair and leaned over his shoulder. “How are the crepes?”

Daken turned his head and *glared* at her.

“Oh don’t give me that look, dear,” the woman chuckled and kissed his cheek. “It was nothing you couldn’t handle.”

“I *couldn’t* handle it. I had to call for *backup,*” Daken spat at her.

“Which is *handling* it,” the woman replied.

Daken glared for another few seconds. “I need documentation of Bellona’s exact age,” he finally said in a tight, still-angry voice.

“I thought you might,” the woman said and caught Daken’s hand, pushing something into it then squeezing for a moment.

“Thank you,” Daken said, his glare relenting a bit.

“Anything for you,” she smiled and then turned her eyes to Zach. “Your little boy is cute.”

“He’s *mine,*” Daken said, expression hardening again.

“Of course he is. I’d never challenge it,” the woman said and then stepped back. “If you need
anything else, you know how to get hold of me.”

“Thank you,” Daken said again, watching her walk to the door and out of the creperie.

“... Who was that?” Zach asked, baffled and unsettled by the exchange.

“Depends on the day,” Daken sighed and shook his head. “Sometimes she’s a crusader for mutant rights, sometimes she’s just a crazy bitch. I don’t think even she knows what it’s going to be.”

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Bobby was curled up in the staff lounge, zenning out on Alto and oblivious to the world outside his phone screen, until the couch creaked and a shadow fell across him as somebody leaned over the back of it. He paused the game and glanced up.

“I heard you got grounded,” Simon said.

Bobby sighed and let his head sink back into the pillow behind him. “What I ‘got’ is still kind of undecided,” he replied. “Kitty’s pretty flustered from all of the Bellona thing and focusing on the legal and PR stuff for now. She says she’ll circle back on what to do with me when she’s figured the rest out. But... yeah, I’m in trouble. I was supposed to be defending the castle, and I abandoned my post.”

“Because Daken called and you came running,” Simon noted, head tilted slightly to the side and one corner of his mouth turned up.

Bobby gritted his teeth for a moment and dropped the phone on his chest. “... Can we please not do this?” he asked quietly.

Simon’s lips twisted to the side and he looked away. “‘Do this?’” he said quietly and let out a quick, hard sigh through his nose. “Am I not allowed to talk to you anymore? Because that’s the impression I’ve been getting.”

“Simon...” Bobby groaned.

“I’m sorry. I know this is my own fault. I’m sorry,” Simon said in a closed, frustrated voice, glaring down at the upholstery. “So you’re too Catholic to be comfortable with hookups. And if you hadn’t been blind-drunk, you probably could have told me that. But you were so blasted you were stumbling and giggling every two steps, and I had no business picking you up in that state.”

“Stop stop stop stop stop,” Bobby pleaded, covering his face in his hands. “I’m just going to ignore the ‘too Catholic’ part of that and skip to the part where you’ve decided to be the grownup here and take responsibility? You are barely older than some of the students here. No, scratch that, you’re not older than the students here because you are a student here now.”

“Only because I took time off after high school,” Simon protested. “I’m older than anybody in my classes, and I am definitely old enough to know better than picking up somebody who’s way way drunker than me.”

“I hate everything about this conversation!” Bobby exclaimed, pulling his hands away from his face and cringing up at Simon.

“We are having this conversation!” Simon snapped back. “... I’m not in love with you, is that what you’re worried about? Why you shut down like that when I asked about Daken?” he asked. “I’m not in love with you, but I like you. Non-specific, adaptable like, and I am, and always was, okay
with being friends. I just-- I made a mistake at the wedding, because obviously what’s a casual ‘why not’ to me isn’t to you. I was too drunk to be thinking about consequences and you were too drunk to be thinking anything at all, and picking you up that way, those circumstances, was dumb.”

Bobby turned his head to the side and stared at nothing, silently pursing his lips for a minute before responding. “You’re younger than my first class of students. And yeah, maybe I was barely eighteen when I got told ‘you’re a teacher now’ and had some teenagers shoved at me, but it’s-- about a month before you showed up on the doorstep, I made an I’m-depressed-and-being-stupid decision and went on a date with one of those students. And I felt bad. Not, ‘bad’ like ‘I feel bad’, but like, unethical. Nothing happened, but I shouldn’t have even gone,” Bobby explained quietly. “And you’re younger than him. That- That freaked me out a lot.”

“... I could tell you were already tipsy at the ceremony, that you’d been pre-gaming, and then you had at least four more at the reception,” Simon said. “So you weren’t just party-drunk, you were having some kind of emotional or existential thing that you were drinking to get away from, and I could see that, I was paying enough attention to see that...” He bit his lip and shook his head. “I think I had two in me and I thought to myself that you’re hot and aside from being a hero, you’re also my hero. You’re the reason I didn’t go into one of those ‘I got screwed one time and ended up in a downward spiral of increasingly pathetic crime’ super villain descents. So I wanted to rock your world... Obviously I screwed up, since apparently I made you miserable instead.”

“Simon, no, that’s not--”

“Hey. Hey. Stop. Since you’re determined to beat yourself up here, how about we compromise and say we both screwed up. Now it’s a wash, and we can pretend like it never happened, and things can be like before, right?” Simon suggested, cutting him off. “I am an adult by all the legal standards, and I wasn’t a student at the time, so you didn’t do anything objectively wrong, and you’re the only one who got hurt here. I just-- Maybe it’s yourself you’re mad at, but it’s effectively the same as you being mad at me, because apparently we can’t be friends now? I just want you to stop being mad, but apologizing doesn’t work because of the part where you’re mad at yourself.”

“... I’m sorry,” Bobby whispered.

“Stop being sorry, please. Just- Just be the cool, great guy who gave me a chance when the rest of the world was victim-blaming me into super villainy and prison,” Simon said, pressing his elbows against the back of the couch and leaning forward a little more. “I like that guy. I want him to be my friend. Not this mopey, evasive jerk who doesn’t talk to me unless I corner him and doesn’t look me in the eye.”

Bobby made an effort to look him in the eye. “Okay,” he agreed, hoping he could make himself follow through, hoping Simon was right and this was the correct way to move forward.

Simon’s expression opened up, looking relieved. “Okay. Do you want to start over with contrived re-introductions, or maybe you can just deliver me the gossip now, and tell me what happened with your archetypal-badboy love interest?”

Bobby tried not to get whiplash at that shift and focused on the question itself, pretended any old ‘buddy’ was asking him. And then he sighed unhappily. “I pissed him off again,” he said.

“So you’re pretty dedicated to this two-steps-forward-two-steps-back thing, huh?” Simon smirked, raising an eyebrow. “What did you do?”

“The right thing, I guess? The second-opinion confirmed,” Bobby shrugged.
X-Men's truncated timeline:
So for a lot of years (like 40-50ish) the only place in the Marvel Universe where you
could really see time passing was in X-Books, because they were giving us sequential
classes of students who popped, went through school, and graduated. That gave us a
general sense of time passing, and sometimes specific ages were stated. In the rest of
the Marvel Universe, Franklin Richards was the only real marker for how much time
was passing, and that was problematic because it seems to be canon now at this point
that Franklin Richards does not age normally (but nobody actually notices because...
because a quantum uncertain age seems to be part of his powerset?) so the universe
outside of X-Books didn't have a any defined passage of time after Peter Parker and
Johnny Storm completed their bachelor's degrees (which they presumably did in 4
years). Why is this relevant? Because recently (well, four years ago, but who's
counting) the Marvel Universe got defined as being ten years old.

This was problematic for the X-Books' timeline, because well more than ten years had
been suggested in the progression of classes and periods between classes up to that
point, closer to 15 or more. Because of this, character's ages got redefined in a way
that's pretty contrary to what seemed to be portrayed in canon before that point, most
notably with Bobby. At the beginning of the original X-Factor, Bobby was 21-22ish,
having recently completed college and gotten CPA certification. That seems to have
now changed, and his *original* age, back in 1963 comics, was outright retconned this
spring in Gold 23, where Bobby states that he was 12 in issue 1, retconning him 3
years younger. I mentioned this in the note on chapter 21, but anyway, continuing on
from there: they seem to have reconciled and truncated the X-Books' timeline with the
new Marvel Universe timeline by just taking out all the lag-space in between X-
classes, so now Bobby is just a few months or a year older than the oldest members of
the New Mutants (Rusty/Sam) and the youngest New Mutant (Rahne) is about the
same age as Generation-X (Were they all about the same age? There didn't seem like a
big spread with them like New Mutants) and Generation-X was just a year or two
ahead of the older members of the New X-Men. So now instead of having age-gaps in
between classes, it's a smooth stair-step from one into the next.

Anyway, apparently Bobby is now canonically 26, where, under previously
established X-Books canon from over the years, he would have been in his early 30s.
But here's a fun detail brought on by the truncating of the X-Books timeline: it seems
to have become canon now that Bobby graduated high school at 13. Wow, Bobby,
well done!
Pretty men are throwing tantrums at Bobby.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At the beginning of summer session Daken had pushed his early morning class back to seven, to recover the five o’clock hour for his own workouts. Apparently he’d managed to discourage any over-enthusiastic audiences or hangers on, because the lawn had been deserted until Daken came into view around the bend of the road at ten after six and turned to jog his way toward the front steps. Bobby pushed away from his bedroom window, running out of his room and down the hall, and came skidding to a stop at the top of the stairs.

Daken stood still as a deer on high alert, about a quarter of the way up, eyes already locked on Bobby by the time he’d come to a full stop. "... Hi," Bobby said, suddenly forgetting his carefully rehearsed lines.

“What?” Daken asked, voice low and guarded.

“I wanted to talk. I think you might have been avoiding me yesterday, so…” Bobby explained awkwardly.

“You think much of yourself,” Daken scoffed. “I had things to do.”

“Okay, fine, that’s legit,” Bobby conceded without a fight. “I still need to talk to you.”

“Some other time. I have to take a shower,” Daken replied.

“Don’t you have your class in less than an hour?” Bobby asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

“That’s why I have to take a shower,” Daken retorted. “Get out of the way.”

“You’re going to shower between workouts?” Bobby rolled his eyes, trying to decide whether he believed it.

“The students are going to be working out. I facilitate and correct their posture,” Daken corrected. “Get out of the way.”

“How am I in the way?” Bobby snapped, baffled by the peculiar repeated demand and annoyed by the evasiveness. “Am I so fat I block the entire hallway?”

Daken glared at him for a moment, and then turned around and started walking back down the stairs. “Fine. I’ll take the elevator.”

“Hey!” Bobby galloped after him. “Are you five years old? I’m just trying to talk to you.”

“And I’m just trying to take a damn shower,” Daken growled without looking back.

“Why are you being so--” Bobby started as he reached out to catch Daken’s arm. But Daken turned quicker than Bobby could react and slammed the heel of his hand into Bobby’s chest so hard it knocked the breath out of him and sent him sprawling back onto the steps.

Bobby was momentarily stunned and spasmodically coughing, but he’d already started reflexively icing up, and completing the process relieved the shock. He rolled to his feet, skating quickly up the stairs and around the corner. Daken was already halfway up the hall, running. “Seriously?!”
Bobby exclaimed and glissaded after him, catching up when Daken had to pause to open his door. “Hey--” Bobby started, grabbing his arm. Daken twisted and slammed a fist into his face so hard Bobby heard the ice crack. “What the hell is wrong with you?!” he gasped, further unsettled by the fact that Daken’s hand was bleeding, however momentarily, as he pulled it back.

“Let. Go,” Daken growled, and something in his glare made Bobby comply.

“What is your problem?” Bobby demanded, trying to keep his temper down.

“My problem?” Daken hissed, glaring defiantly back into his eyes. “You ambushed me, refused to leave me alone when I told you to, chased me, and then you grabbed me, showing your willingness to use physical force to prevent me getting away, because we both know so very well that I can’t fight you off.”

“That’s- That’s not--”

“That is exactly what you did!” Daken snapped.

Bobby put up his hands and took a step back, deicing. “I’m sorry I made you uncomfortable--”

Daken gave a loud, bitter laugh as he took a back-step into his doorway. “Yes, I’m uncomfortable. That’s what’s wrong with this picture,” he snarled. Shiny with sweat as Daken was, the word ‘radiant’ came unbidden to mind. “My feelings, my irrational hypersensitivity, is obviously the problem, and not your whiteboy self-entitlement telling you that my needs are less valid or important than yours.”

“You-You’re twisting--”

“Which part of what I just said wasn’t true?” Daken cut him off, voice sharp but rich. He was beautiful when he was angry. Fierce and vibrant.

“I- I don’t know! The tone?” Bobby was stumbling over his thoughts as he tried to form responses. Wisps of Daken’s hair were sticking to his head, caught against his damp skin; that tiny detail kept drawing Bobby’s eye as he tried not to stare at Daken’s shirtlessness too much.

“The tone,” Daken scoffed. “Well I must have missed the proper inflection while you were chasing me!” Before Bobby could respond, he stepped back and slammed the door.

Bobby stared at the closed door for several seconds. It momentarily occurred to him that he had full security permissions and could override the lock, not let the conversation end there. No, that was stupid and crazy and wrong. Should he knock at the door and complain until Daken gave in? No, Daken wasn’t going to let anyone harass him into anything, and that’s what it would be, wasn’t it. Maybe there wasn’t any right thing to do here but walk away. He hesitated a moment longer before doing so.

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A fairly large group of kids had loosely organized themselves to play a game with no name and very few rules on the front acre. They had a soccer ball and had defined the paved walkway leading to the front steps as the middle of the field. Whichever side of the walkway the ball was on when the dance music station playing on somebody’s radio went to commercials, that would define which team got a point. Powers were allowed, and there were no defined rules of conduct, so Bobby was keeping a close eye on the swarm to try and minimize the number of broken bones and concussions that might otherwise happen, but there were going to be a lot of bruised and scraped shins at the end of the day.
It was all younger kids; the upperclassmen seemed to be somewhere else. Bobby had heard a rumor about some kind of meeting, but no specific details. “Too rough, Dorie!” Bobby called at the flailing scrum.

One of the main doors opened and slammed behind him, and Bobby turned his head to see Alex Summers storming out of the building. Bobby’s mind powered down, drawing a blank, as Alex’s eyes found him and he stopped to glare Bobby down.

“What?”

“. . . What are you doing here, Alex?” Bobby asked. Nobody had told him Alex was coming. Nobody had told him Alex was already here.

“Oh, so I don’t have a right to be here?” Alex demanded.

“I- I didn’t say that!” Bobby protested.

“But you’re thinking it! And Kitty? She came right out with it!*” Alex spat back. “She’s, like, twelve! Where the hell does she get off?”

“Alex, calm down. What--”

“Don’t you tell me to calm down, you absolute shit!” Alex snarled back, getting up in Bobby’s face. “You have some fucking nerve! You stole Lorna from me--”

“What?”

“--ruined my fucking life, and now all of a sudden you’re just like ‘Psych! I don’t even like girls!’”

Bobby reached out quickly and grabbed Alex’s face, palm covering his mouth to silence him. “Lorna dumped me for you, Alex!” he retorted. “She dumped you almost two years later for, I am assuming, completely unrelated reasons!”

Alex shoved him back. “And Annie?!”

“Also dumped me for you!” Bobby exclaimed. “I had nothing to do with her leaving either!”

“Nothing to do with it?! I’m supposed to believe that?!”

“What the hell do you think, there’s some kind of conspiracy?” Bobby asked, frustrated and kind of lost at this point, as the accusations got into completely idiotic territory. “I didn’t ‘ruin your life’, Alex!”

“So you’re saying it’s my fault!” Alex shouted.

“I- I don’t know! Are you off your meds or something?! Were you on meds?!” Bobby yelled back.

“Was it all some stupid GAME to you?!” Alex was legitimately screaming now. “You screw around with MY life! You steal MY girls! And you never even WANTED them?!”

“You are insane!” Bobby brought his own volume up a notch but didn’t try to actually match
Alex’s. “I heard you’d stopped being insane, but apparently I heard wrong!”

“You--”

“HEY SUMMERS!” Bobby and Alex both startled and looked up to where Daken was leaning out of a second story window a couple yards north of them, glaring at Alex. “HOW. IS. YOUR. WIFE?!”

Alex bristled, looking even angrier, but didn’t respond, just glared.

Daken glared back another few seconds before climbing out of the window, so quickly and fluidly that he was already dropping before Bobby could give a panicked yell for him not to jump out of a damned window. He landed with catlike, effortless elegance, then straightened up and walked toward them. “Is this guy bothering you, Honey?” he asked, reaching the steps and climbing them, his glare still fixed on Alex.

Bobby gritted his teeth at that, as if the last ten minutes hadn’t been annoying enough. “You’re not funny,” he growled.

Daken gave a low, molasses-dark laugh and snaked an arm around Bobby’s waist, reeling him in. “Do you think you’re in a position to throw stones, Love?” he replied.

Bobby paused, cancelling his retort as he noted that Daken’s tone was playful rather than scathing. It slowly dawned that Daken wasn’t mocking him, he was tormenting Alex. And right this minute, Bobby was kind of good with that.

Shock and fresh anger played across Alex’s face as he looked back and forth between them. “Really, Bobby? This degenerate?”

“Says the man who tried to launch a mind-controlling bioweapon against all the mutants on the planet this year?” Daken scoffed. “But that’s okay, it was just a little mistake, right? Bygones, of course. I didn’t hear your answer though, how’s Miz Van Dyne doing?”

“... Shut up,” Alex growled.

“I forget, how did the break-up go again?” Daken said in a mock-thoughtful voice. “Was it because you abducted and tortured her for several months, or did you just dump her and take up with one of your brother’s mentally unstable cast-offs again?”

“Shut. Up,” Alex’s volume started climbing once more.

“You’re a damn piece of work, Summers,” Daken hissed, dropping the false pleasantries and resuming his hard glare at Alex. His arm didn’t loosen, keeping Bobby against his side. “Everything has to revolve around you, doesn’t it? In your ludicrous paranoid delusion, you’ve decided that other people’s sexuality is just a joke on you? Are you also the sort of man who believes that any woman who won’t date you is a lesbian?”

“Go to hell,” Alex snapped.

“Been there. Couldn’t hold me,” Daken replied with a momentary smirk before sneering again. “You’re not really that dense though, are you? You have to realize it was never about the girls. It was about you and him.”

Bobby’s blood ran cold and his heart stopped for a moment before starting up again at a panicked allegro. Daken wouldn’t really do this to him, would he? Was this some kind of revenge after all?
“The girls, shame on both of you, were just tokens in the game, it was never about them,” Daken said again. “It was about who the better Summers loved more: the real baby-brother or the surogat.” He gave a soft scoff and Bobby felt like he was three steps behind this conversation. “It’s sad, really, you never stood a chance... Because just like all the women who left when they realized you really are nothing more than a pretty face, Scott Summers just had too much self-respect to invest himself in you.”

A shocked silence followed Daken’s words and seemed to go on for a long time as Alex stared at him, eyes wide, seeming too dumbfounded to manage any emotion beyond shock. Finally his expression darkened, and he turned a glare on Bobby again. “... You have terrible taste in men,” he said in a low, dangerous voice, then turned sharply and stormed down the steps. As he walked away, Bobby noticed that the kids had stopped playing their game to watch the show, and he felt newly self-conscious about Daken’s arm around his waist.

“He’s right,” Daken murmured very quietly, close to Bobby’s ear. “You do. Is that what makes you go weak at the knees, Drake?”

“A long time ago,” Bobby whispered irritably, turning his eyes to the stone of the steps. “Today? Nah, I think I’m over it... Why did you-- I thought you were mad at me?”

Daken was quiet for a beat or two. “Alex Summers is a collapsing cesspool of a man, and he had no right to spew that hateful garbage at you or anyone,” he growled.

“... Thanks,” Bobby said and then was silent for a few seconds before feeling guilty. “He’s-- I don’t think he meant it. He’s just-- He’s been through the wringer lately. Or always, maybe. And-And I’m not trying to look a gift-horse in the mouth here or anything, but holy crap do you ever put the ‘assault’ into ‘verbal-assault’. That was brutal.”

“No,” Daken snapped and let go of Bobby’s waist, grabbing him by the shoulders and glaring at him. “No. Do not rationalize or apologize for him. He’s had a bad year? Well he’s caused a lot of other people to have a bad year too. And I don’t care about ‘mitigating circumstances’, do not let anybody talk to you like that.”

“... Okay.”

Daken let him go and stepped back. He turned to look up at the window he’d jumped from. “Did I tell you you could take a break?” he demanded, giving a stern frown to Benjamin and Hope, who were leaning out over the sill.

Benjamin started to shrink back, but then visibly squared himself and snapped back, “I’ll take breaks when I need to take breaks!”

“You’ve had a long enough one, and the show’s over,” Daken retorted. “You’d better be tearing up the floor when I get back in there.” He turned toward the door as Benjamin and Hope disappeared back into the classroom.

“Daken,” Bobby called, and he paused. “... Are you mad at me?”

Daken gave him a hard, silent stare for a minute before responding. “What’s the cliché, ‘I’m not angry, I’m disappointed’?” he said quietly. “I told you ‘no’, and you tried to force me to do what you wanted me to.”

Bobby recoiled and flustered. “What? That’s-- You can’t-- That is not--”

Daken grabbed Bobby’s arm, thumb digging into his bicep hard enough Bobby thought it might
bruise. “Do not ambush me. Do not chase me. Do not corner me,” he growled, glaring into Bobby’s eyes. “I am not your prey.”

“... I’m sorry.”

“‘Sorry’ will mean something if you don’t do it again,” Daken snapped, glaring for another minute. “And never bother me before my shower,” he added, then let Bobby go and turned, striding to the door.

Bobby watched him go, feeling confused, frustrated, kind of nauseous, and exceedingly overwhelmed by the whole scene.

Chapter End Notes

* See Astonishing X-Men (2017) issue 13 for what the hecks Alex is talking about/the scene he just walked out of. Also, you should all read it anyway. The first 12 issues of AXM vol 4 were... a thing that happened (bright point: it looks like writers may be canon acknowledging that Xavier is and maybe always was a villain, and we've kind of all known that for at least a few years at this point). Issue 13-17 are a completely separate story-arch with a completely separate cast, and it is AMAZING. It is Alex Summers and the Train-WreX-Men and it is aww-hilarious.

I do not hate Alex ABD Summers. The canon scene that inspired/preceded this scene has Alex on the edge of a breakdown, so he was ready to throw a tantrum at whoever set him off, and oh hey, there's that guy he used to fight/argue with a lot (Alex and Bobby bitching at each other was a major theme of Adjectiveless X-Men 2004).

So when I first started this fic, the plan was that it would be drabble-format, but it ended up not being that. It's jumped around in time twice, but not actually that much considering how long it's gotten (this is the same thing that happened to LAoD). I took 'Drabbles' out of the fic title a while ago and this week I decided that I should front-load the content labels instead of doing them on a case-by-case basis, so going forward you'll probably only see content-warnings on an individual chapter if there's a scene involving depictions of blood, or specific references to rape or abuse.
Bobby had woken before his alarm by a long shot. He’d done the most sensible thing and stared at his ceiling for a half hour, but after seven o’clock had come and gone, it became more difficult to stay still with each passing minute. Stupid. He didn’t make it to a quarter after, before Bobby was rolling out of bed and creeping to the window. Pathetic. He crouched down and pulled the curtain back and then around behind him. He settled down on his knees, resting his arms on the sill and his chin on his arms.

Two dozen students in an eclectic mix of activewear were spread out in neat lines on the front acre. It would be creepy if Bobby was surreptitiously watching them. It was probably still creepy to be surreptitiously watching their coach. Bobby stared at Daken, shirtless and gorgeous, gesturing through some kind of explanation or direction. He raptly studied the way Daken’s shoulders and biceps flexed as his arms moved. A little voice in the back of Bobby’s head kept telling him that all he’d had to do was say ‘yes’, and he’d blown it. That voice was a jerk and wrong. He sighed.

After yesterday morning’s debacle he’d been kicking himself all day, frustrated, angry, confused. He didn’t know what had set Daken off, if he just took violent exception to being caught off-guard and under-dressed (entirely possible), or if there was some cue Bobby had missed. But he did know that guilt for making it worse definitely fell on him when he’d given literal chase. He still wasn’t sure if he’d been forgiven, or if Alex was just so offensive that Daken had called a momentary truce.

He needed to get sure. Tonight, after classes were out of the way, after all the boxes on Daken’s very busy schedule were ticked, Bobby would ask him, in a polite, non-ambushy way, if they could please sit down for a calm and productive conversation. That was the responsible and rational adult way to handle things, Bobby assured himself as he followed Daken with his eyes. He watched raptly as Daken planted his feet a yard apart and sank down, knees bending to 90 degrees, straight out to the sides, with his arms somewhere between ecarte and swan-arms, then he twisted to the left, bringing one knee within inches of the ground and both hands forward. God, he was flexible. And strong; there was absolutely zero appearance of strain as he supported his weight, with his knees bent and skewed in a position Bobby thought he couldn’t have held for more than thirty painful seconds.

Bobby tried to pretend he wasn’t thinking way too hard about Daken’s spread legs. God, he was so beautiful. He was clean and crisp down on the lawn right now, but Bobby had the image in his head of yesterday, when Daken had been drenched with sweat and the best case Bobby had ever seen for idolatry. Bobby bit his lip hard and put his head down, forehead leaned against his arm for a minute. Jacking off while watching somebody through a window without their knowledge would probably the creepiest thing he could do right now. So he definitely wasn’t going to do that. But maybe he could hold it together for a few more minutes, to bask in Daken’s radiance a while longer, before running for the sanctuary of the shower to indulge in fantasies of spread legs and sweaty skin.

He drew a deep breath and held it for a minute as he lifted his head and turned his attention outside again. The students were doing a roly-swoopy to the left, and then a roly-swoopy to the right, then repeating, and Daken was walking between the rows, pausing in front of students here and there and addressing them, sometimes with gestures. He paused to the side of the roly-swooping
mass for a minute, standing between the class and the building and watching them continue to
work the form. Then he turned and looked up.

Bobby choked and fought against the impulse to duck. It was closing in on solstice, so the sun was
high enough in the sky that there probably wouldn’t be any direct glare off the windows by now,
but Bobby hadn’t turned his lights on and it was bright outside, maybe the glass was hiding him
behind a little bit of mirror effect. And if it wasn’t… Well shit. But it was probably a little too late
to hide and pretend he hadn’t been watching. Running away now might just make this look even
more pathetic. Cowardly, anyway. Bobby held perfectly still while Daken continued looking in his
direction for a minute, before finally turning his attention back to the class. Bobby let out a shaky
breath. Had he been spotted? Or was Daken just staring at Bobby’s window of his own accord. For
reasons. Yeah, dream on.

Bobby groaned and pulled himself away from the window. Then he headed for the bathroom,
because mortification at maybe being caught staring hadn’t chased thoughts of Daken’s sweaty, so
flexible body from his mind, and there was something he needed to take care of before he could
think about anything else.

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“Where’s Dani?” Kitty asked, coming into the conference room where about half of the staff had
gathered so far.

“Just got into the hanger,” Rachel answered as she stretched her arms above her head, trying to
work out the lingering stiffness after a psychic defenses class of standing very very still for a bit
longer than her body was happy about. “There was a storm over Wisconsin and she went around,
so they ran a bit behind. They’ll be up in a few minutes.”

“But they got here.” Kitty dropped into the chair next to Rachel and looked equal parts relieved

“Take a breath,” Rachel said.

“Getting this duck in hand is worth two in the pond,” Daken hummed, elbows on the table and chin
rested on his laced fingers.

“Are we mixing metaphors or proverbs now?” Kitty snorted, rolling her eyes and then glancing to
the door as Ororo and Amara came in.

“You don’t like mixed drinks?” Daken chuckled.

“Martini or Manhattan?” Kitty shot back, and Rachel smiled to herself; she was loosening up
around Daken, becoming comfortable enough with his presence to appreciate his wit.

“Cosmopolitan?”

“Well you just out-girlied me,” Kitty wrinkled her nose and stuck the tip of her tongue through her
teeth.

“I could out-girly you with every breath, Pryde,” Daken retorted.

“That sounds like a challenge.”

“Bring it.”
Kitty cracked, rocking forward and leaning her forehead in her hands as she started giggling. Rachel caught Daken’s eyes and sent him a thankful grin, to which he smirked and shrugged. “Mm, time to get composed and pretend you’re a very mature grownup, Kitty,” Rachel sighed, gently nudging at her with an elbow. “Here they come.”

Kitty straightened up, sucking a quick deep breath and trying to look somewhat dignified, but her eyes were still bright and her cheeks faintly flushed with amusement. The door opened again, and two seconds later, just as a foot was passing the threshold, there was a sudden surge of anger, fear and betrayal so strong it hurt.

“Daken?” Rachel gasped and turned toward him again as Daken jumped to his feet and slammed his hands down on the table. “WHAT THE HELL IS THAT DOING HERE?!”

A young man, the newest addition to the school’s full time staff, froze a few feet into the room as everyone around the table turned to stare at Daken. “What are you--” Dani started, following just behind her recruit, as shocked anger flashing across her face and psyche.

“You’re planning to put the students’ mental health in the care of a fucking demon?!” Daken demanded, not taking his eyes off the newcomer.

“Excuse me?” Illyana huffed.

The young man’s jet-black hair picked up a frosting of silver and lengthened slightly as he looked down demurely. “Mister Daken, if I could just--” he began in a soft voice.

In one fluid motion, Daken picked up the chair he’d been sitting in and threw it at the young man’s head. He was already running as Dani tackled her friend to the ground. Daken skidded and scrabbled, cornering around the doorway, trying to stay as far from the young man as possible while escaping right past him. After the door swung shut and the chair had finished clattering to the floor, the room was left in shocked silence.

Kitty was the one to break it, demanding, “What the hell was that?!”

“Fear,” the young man answered, getting to his feet and straightening his blazer. His hair sort and black again.

“I am so sorry. I have no idea what is going on with him,” Kitty said, walking around the table to stand in front of him, radiating embarrassment from every pore.

“Please don’t, it’s- it’s fine. That was actually a pretty reasonable reaction. We’ve met,” the young man sighed, shaking his head. “I had moderate control over my powers by that point, I was fine around most people, but that was the first time I’d been near someone whose psyche had been specifically conditioned for fear.”

“Oh… Shit,” Dani said, cringing. “I didn’t realize.”

“I should have said something,” he said, looking down. “I’ll look for him later. I owe him an apology.”

“That might not be the greatest decision for your health,” Jubilee noted, frowning at him.

“I’m very hard to kill. And hard to keep dead.” He gave her a wan smile and a small shrug before turning to address the rest of the room. “So, hi. My name is Terrance Ward. I look forward to
Daken sat crouched on a section of roof that was on the back side of the main building. The angle sheltered it to view from below, and a wall of tall pines did as much for being seen from a distance. A flier might spot him, but all they’d see would be Daken staring blankly out at the trees. The heat of the shingles soaking through him was uncomfortable yet comforting, grounding. He was oblivious to the passage of time until the scent-landscape of city grime and park was invaded by a very particular one that made the hair on the back of his neck rise. Something almost-but-not-quite human, mingled with ether, hemlock and moonflower.

Daken’s eyes narrowed as they turned to see a hand appear over the edge of the roof, attempt to grip it, recoil at the heat for a moment, and then try again. Another hand joined it a moment later before finally a head, from just below the nose up, breached with a distinctly awkward air. “... I think maybe this was very stupid,” the demon-spawn said nervously, eyes flicking toward the ground a few times.

“That’s an understatement,” Dake hissed. “How did you find me?”

“I can dowse toward high concentrations of fear,” Ward answered, ruddy eyes turning back to him. “Anger is closely-linked, it only takes a little more effort to feel for.”

Daken pushed his words out through gritted teeth, “It would be very easy to solve you right now, with just a little push.”

“... I think I could get what I’d need to survive that fall from you,” Ward said quietly. “I don’t want to, but I don’t particularly want to splatter either, and my powers have triggered as a survival reflex before. Could we please not test if that still works?”

Daken growled wordlessly, glaring daggers at him.

“I want to apologize for the first time we met.”

“I don’t know how you charmed Dani--”

“Dani’s the one who taught me to control it,” Ward interjected, cutting him off before more threats could be leveled. “And I’ve had five years to practice since then. I haven’t had a slip in a long time.”

“I smelled it. I saw it. In the conference room. You started to slip,” Daken retorted.

Ward’s gaze lowered guiltily. “... I reigned it in though... I’m sorry. Your fear is much more visceral than most people’s,” he said softly.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Daken spat.

“Nobody’s afraid of me. I’m just a mirror.” Ward replied, looking back at him for a moment and then down at the ground again. “I’m really having trouble hanging on. May I please come up there?”

“Can you even?” Daken raised an eyebrow at him.

“I--” He shifted his hands a little and jerked slightly as Daken heard the sound of a shoe slipping just slightly. “Maybe not...”
Daken sat silently for a minute before moving, creeping toward the edge and glaring down at him. Based on what he’d seen five years ago, and Ward’s comment about surviving the fall, he hazarded a guess about the demidemon’s strange, improbable abilities. “You manifest the powers and strengths of the forms you borrow, yes?” He pursed his lips, watching Ward’s eyes flick back up toward him. “I know where you could find some prodigious agility and climbing skill.”

“... I think that would be counterproductive to the conversation I want to have here,” Ward replied quietly. He was still for a moment before apparently deciding to try again. He lifted his elbow over the lip of the roof and attempted to pull himself higher. A second after he’d transferred weight to the arm, Daken heard the sound of shoes slipping, accompanied by a gasp. Ward’s hands scrambled and grabbed at the roof, but his nails didn’t sink into the shingles, staying round, thin and pale. And then he was falling backward.

Daken moved, grabbing Ward’s arm with his right hand and sinking the claws of his left into the roof behind him as an anchor. Ward’s eyes were wide and tinged with panic, and the color of them… Daken gritted his teeth painfully tight as the smell of oil, spice and blood cut the air. “Don’t panic. Don’t struggle. Climb,” Daken growled.

“Sorry. Sorry,” Ward gasped and then got a grip on the lip of the roof again with the other hand while Daken started pulling him up by the arm. The repellent scent faded as he focused on the task at hand, and after a comedically awkward ascent, Ward tremulously crawled on hands and knees farther up the roof to put distance between himself and the edge.

“You tried to climb onto a roof in Oxfords,” Daken snorted derisively, rolling his eyes. “Should’ve brought sneakers…” Ward mumbled.

“Barefoot, if at all,” Daken corrected. “And now that you’re up here, I think maybe I’ll strand you.”

“I’m sorry,” Ward called quickly. He was freshly nervous at the prospect of being abandoned, but the words also rang sincere. “I knew Osborn just brought me in to exploit my powers, looking for dirt he could use to control you and the others. Obviously he would have had access to actually-qualified-and-licensed psychologists to really evaluate you... and it’s not like he had any interest in my education and development.”

“You knew, and yet you let him,” Daken sneered.

“I- I’d been mostly controlling it for a while. I thought I could do it- keep in control, give Osborn nothing useful and pretend I didn’t know why I was really there. Keep my head down... I held it together with the others,” Ward said guiltily, rolling onto his rear and getting settled, still radiating discomfort, no doubt from the heat as much as the precariousness. “You were different. Their fears... they were narcissists. Their fears were things like ‘nobody will appreciate how great I am’.” He pursed his lips for a moment and sighed, looking down and away. “And on the cameras, at a distance, you seemed just like them... You wanted to seem just like them, right?”

“... Osborn hired me to be a thug for him,” Daken said, staying where he was next to the edge. “And I played dumb for him. I didn’t have to play too hard, he wanted me to be dumb, and so he saw what he wanted to see.”

Ward looked back at him, quiet for a second before asking, “Why did you want him to think you were dumb?”

“Because then he doesn’t look too close,” Daken shrugged dismissively. “The first few days, I
wasn’t sure what I wanted there, so I played dumb because I was playing it safe. Being underestimated is the greatest advantage one can have. By the end of a week, I knew that I despised that man. I kept playing dumb so that he wouldn’t notice I was always working in subtle ways to undermine him.”

“And he didn’t notice?” Ward asked curiously.

“No. The best way to fool a man like him is to let him go on believing he’s smarter than you,” Daken replied. “The only one he ever worried about was Karla, because she goes out of her way to tell everyone how smart she is… Rather stupid thing to do, if you ask me.”

Ward tilted his head slightly, considering. “Not ‘stupid’ so much as part of the neurosis. She’s a narcissist, she can’t ‘play dumb’ because how others see her is part of her personal valuation. She needs to control how she’s perceived.”

“Are you allowed to tell me that?” Daken asked, smirking slightly. “Isn’t there some kind of doctor-patient ‘privilege’ there?”

“I wasn’t a licensed therapist then, I was a student, so there’s no legal privilege,” Ward said, shaking his head. “And from an ethical standpoint? Our ‘session’ was neither private nor therapeutic. It was a farce. It was mud-raking with a paper-thin pretense of ‘psychological evaluation’ thrown over the top that didn’t fool anybody. None of you actually believed I was there as a psychologist qualified to make any kind of diagnosis or recommendations, because I wasn’t.”

Daken chewed on his lip for a moment, considering that. “… Bullseye?”

Ward raised an eyebrow at him.

“Come on.”

Ward sighed and shrugged slightly. “Either psychopath or sociopath, I’m not sure which without some idea of what he was like as a preadolescent.”

“What’s he afraid of?” Daken asked.

Ward pursed his lips and looked away again. “… I’m not comfortable answering that.”

“You said there wasn’t any ‘privilege’,” Daken goaded, intrigued that there may have been something more than the earlier-mentioned failure to be appreciated.

“… And if somebody asked me what you were afraid of, I wouldn’t be comfortable answering that either.”

Daken was quiet for a minute, processing that. He wasn’t lying. As disgustedly violating as Ward’s powers were, his personality seemed to contradict them, hold them at bay. Power corrupts, but Ward gave an air, one he bought into himself, of high integrity. “… Do you even really know what I’m afraid of? Or just what it looks like?” Daken asked at length.

Ward’s eyes were distant and unfocused for a few seconds before turning to Daken again. “He’s a god… or a demon?”

“That’s two different words for the exact same thing.”

Ward nodded slowly, watching him. “… In the conference room, you called me a demon,” he noted quietly. “You’re the kind of person-- When something scares you, you research it. Because
“knowledge is power. You know who my ‘biological’ father is?”

“There’s a handful of D-list super villains with some stories to tell about you,” Daken noted.

“I could say the same about you.”

Daken huffed slightly in amusement. Ward had a soft voice and reserved speech, but the soft snap had come quick and easy to his lips. Daken thought he might sense a flicker of wit under the outward timidity.

“... I’m not a random wild-oat like Zeus or whoever leaves lying around,” Ward murmured, his eyes lowering again and a shadow coming over his face. “He conceived me deliberately… But I’m not… I wasn’t supposed to be an ‘heir’ or an agent-on-Earth or… that sort of thing.” He swallowed and closed his eyes. “... I’m supposed to be a vessel… My mind and soul are bi-products to be scooped out and discarded… Learning to control my powers, my connection to him and his realm, it’s not just about making friends. It’s survival.”

Daken studied him, sorting through the humanish scents in him while listening to his heart and gauging him visually. Ward opened his eyes after a minute, looking back at him, and the silence continued for a while. “It sounds like the therapist needs therapy,” Daken noted at last.

“I’ve had a lot,” Ward nodded. “And if I start feeling like I need it again, I’ll restart sessions.”

Daken was quiet for another minute. “I won’t cast aspersions upon your competence for that, everybody has problems after all, and having struggled with your powers and essential nature gives you a better platform from which to understand the students here,” he said, and then paused before asking, “But do you believe you are safe to be around them?”

Ward seemed to consider the question and his answer carefully for a moment before responding. “There are a handful of people in this building who are as ‘powerful’ or ‘dangerous’ as me. I think I’m as safe to be around the students as any of the teachers are, or as they are to be around each other,” he said slowly. “And, as I know particularly well, what’s most dangerous to people, especially teenagers, is what’s inside of them. And that’s what I came here to help them address.”

Daken drew a slow, deep breath and sighed it out. “... Fine. I’ll help you get off the roof.”

“OhGodthankyou.”

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Bobby should have talked to Daken last night. Or at least he should have tried. But he’d been afraid of a repeat of the morning, so he’d thought that he should give Daken a bit of space, before making another attempt that better aligned with Daken’s list of dos and don’ts. He’d figured that if he gave Daken a day to cool down, maybe he’d be calm and receptive and everything would go fine. But then Daken had screamed and thrown a damn chair.

At least it hadn’t been aimed at him, but Bobby realized now that waiting until Daken had a good day was both cowardly and impractical. So he stuck to the plan and schedule he’d set that morning. He couldn’t let the explosive drama of the staff-meeting derail him. That would be the coward’s move, and he might as well just give up on everything now if he was going to take it. So instead, Bobby walked as boldly as he could manage up the hall that evening, getting all the way to Daken’s door before hesitating with his fist raised to knock. He stared at the dark wood for several elongated seconds before steeling himself and giving a firm rap against it.

After an uncomfortable wait that probably seemed longer than it was, the door opened and Daken
raised an eyebrow at him. “I-- Can we talk now? Please?” Bobby asked, really hoping that wasn’t a whine in his voice.

Daken seemed to consider for a moment, Bobby saw him run his tongue along his upper teeth, and then he leaned to the side sightly and turned his shoulders a little so Bobby could see past him into the front room, where Zach and Bellona were sitting on the couch with the glow of a paused television on them as they looked back at Bobby. “We’re watching Star Wars,” Daken said neutrally.

“Oh yeah? Which one?” Bobby felt dumb after he said that. Did it matter? Did he care? Was he just grasping for conversational lifelines? Zach was glaring at him as if he might be hoping he’d developed kill-vision.

“Does it matter?” Daken asked, and Bobby tried really hard not to cringe.

“I- I just really need to…” Bobby mumbled and then stopped when Daken’s hand landed against his chest, centered above Bobby’s sternum, parodying the palm-punch Daken had given him on the stairs the previous morning.

Daken gave a gentle shove, pushing Bobby back two steps as he stepped out of the room and pulled the door shut behind him. He was quiet a moment and his eyes flickered downward, long lashes shading them. The tiny expression-gesture struck Bobby as a very geisha-esque demur. “I’m busy right now,” he said, in a softer voice than Bobby usually heard from him. “Tomorrow?”

“But not before your shower, right?” Bobby tried to joke. But it wasn’t a joke, it was just a lame failure at any kind of useful or engaging conversation.

“Dinner?”

Bobby was silent for a few seconds because it felt like his lungs had been blocked off. Finally he got a breath into them and responded while nodding, “Yeah. Okay.”

“Okay,” Daken echoed and then reached out, sliding his thumb across the scanner and pushing his door open again.

Bobby watched him disappear and then stayed still, staring at the closed door again for a while, feeling cold and hot and a little breathless. It wasn’t a date, he reminded himself, to try and reign in his delusional imagination. They were just going to have a very calm, adult conversation. And then maybe next time it would be a date.

Chapter End Notes

Terrance Ward has absolutely no relation to Grant Ward, and was actually introduced to the 616 something like 5 years before Agents of SHIELD debuted (and his name was designed to be 100% pun, because Dan Slot gets back to Marvel's roots). Since I was writing that roof scene from Daken-POV and he defaults to last-name-basis with most people, it kept feeling really weird to write. I hope the name thing wasn't too distracting for you guys.

To those who are asking yourselves "Who the hell is Terrance Ward?” he's 'Trauma' from the Avengers Initiative comics that ran from just after Civil War through the end
of Dark Reign. He's a half god-or-demon (slippery canon on which) contact-
metamorph who takes on the form and powers of somebody's fear. Dani was the
experienced fear-powers specialist brought in to tutor him in the first half of the series.
One of the best things about Terry is that he was initially listed in the official
government database as an 'omega level threat/asset', but then later Gyrich
downgraded him (despite his powers still being nigh-godlike) for being too nice to
threaten anybody. Ah, Henry Peter Gyrich, you might be a borderline-hateful
curmudgeon, but you're a hilarious borderline-hateful curmudgeon.

Why is he here? When I was writing the staff-meeting chapter, I realized that now I
needed to actually write in another school counselor, because it kind of turned into a
big deal. So I was like "crap," and started searching through the Marvel Wikia for all
the psychologists/psychiatrists in the 616. I hate dropping an OC into a plot-important
role in my fics because, oh my God you guys, the Marvel Universe has SO. MANY.
CHARACTERS. So when I need a character to just fill a plot-role in my Marvel fics,
I've made it a challenge to myself to seek out obscure minor characters that will work.
That was my original thought as I started searching the Wikia, but then after I'd built
my list of therapists, and deleted all the ones who definitely wouldn't work because
they were evil or dead or something, I got frustrated because logic started getting in
the way as I thought that Kitty would be a jerk to ask one of these characters to give up
their private practice or other pretty successful career to come be a school counselor.
But then I remembered, there is a Marvel psychology student who has prior
associations with X-staff, and in Marvel-time he could be just now graduating a
masters program.
“Inhale, chaturanga dandasana... Exhale, adho mukha svanasana...” Daken called, walking between the rows of students, leaning down for a moment to press down between a sophomore’s shoulder blades. “Inhale, lift your right leg into a straight line with your body... Exhale... Inhale... Exhale... Inhale, bring that knee to your face... Exhale, anjaneyasana... Arms straight up, inhale...” He pushed at the small of a freshman’s back. “Virabha--”

“What’s that?” one of the girls exclaimed suddenly and a murmur of excitement started among the others as Daken straightened up and turned around.

It wasn’t hard to spot. A flagrant disruption in an otherwise clear, blue sky. A familiar shape. Daken knew exactly what it was. Everyone in the city who had eyes on it right now knew exactly what it was. But even as he knew what it was, alarms were going off in Daken’s mind that it was wrong. He stared at it, his mind running through a logical, linear breakdown of every reason what he was seeing didn’t make sense. He heard his students standing up or plopping down on their rears, taking his distraction as a cue to rest.

That flare-signal hadn’t been used in a decade. Even Richards had the common sense to realize that mobile phones were far more practical in nearly every circumstance. And even Richards wouldn’t be so boorish as to announce his non-death in such a thoroughly crass manner. This wasn’t him. This was either an utterly vile taunt or a feint that only the most gullible man in the world would fall for. But that was fine, since it was obviously intended for the most gullible man in the world. And in the distance Daken saw a little ribbon of flame on a trajectory for the place that flare had originated.

He pulled the phone out of his pocket and pressed one of the contacts on his ‘frequently used’ list. It rang, and the little ribbon of fire didn’t slow down. It rang. It rang. It went to voicemail. Daken hung up and pressed on another contact. It rang, and the line picked up.

“To what do I owe the--” Gambit’s voice started.

“Tell your wife Johnny is flying into an ambush right now!” Daken cut him off.

“What-- Where?”

“Right. now! Tell her!” Daken snapped. “Everybody in midtown can see that damn thing in the sky, and Johnny took the bait!”

He heard Gambit’s voice, away from the receiver, yelling for Rogue, as well as running feet. He heard a quick exchange and then Gambit’s voice came back to the receiver. “She on her way.”

“How fast is she?” Daken asked.

“She fast,” Gambit assured him.
Whoever set this up would have to know that he was one of Rogue’s. Would they have known her speed and accounted for it? Would Johnny be teleported away the moment he arrived? “... Thank you,” Daken whispered, feeling nauseous as he continued to stare at the sky. That little ribbon of fire had already reached its destination. Was Johnny already gone? With SHIELD a thing of the past, was there any Big Brother that could track teleport signatures? “Do you have a contact for Grimm?”

“Yeah, I’m sure we do. I’ll go find it,” Gambit said.

“If he’s outside, he’s already seen it. If not--”

“I’ll tell him. Daken, don’t worry, we gonna get this sorted,” Gambit assured him.

“Call me as soon as you have news?” Daken asked, his voice getting pinched at the end.

“Of course, Frère.”

“Thank you.” Daken ended the call and stayed still, staring at the sky. The flare had started to fade now.

“Mister Daken?” one of his students called.

“Class dismissed,” Daken responded quietly.

The students hesitated for a moment before they started to wander away.

Daken put the phone back into his pocket and bit his lip. He closed his eyes and ran his hands back over his hair. He couldn’t get there faster than Rogue, she was probably already there. If Johnny had been teleported, Daken couldn’t track from that. He was checking off boxes on the list of every way he was useless right now, his stomach churning, when his phone rang. He grabbed it and hit accept, bringing it quickly to his ear. “Yes?”

“It wasn’t an ambush. It was just kids,” Gambit said.

“... Kids?” Daken asked, confused.

“I don’t know more dan dat yet. Rogue’s tryin’ t’keep Johnny from tearin’ dem apart right now,” Gambit replied apologetically.

“... Okay,” Daken mumbled, looking down at the grass and frowning. “Thank you for letting me know.”

“You need anyting?” Gambit asked.

“I’m fine,” Daken replied, shaking his head, though no one was there to see. “Johnny’s the one who’s going to need... I don’t know, hot chocolate and bourbon?”

“Good call. I will be prepared to make dat happen,” Gambit agreed.

“Okay... Bye,” Daken said softly and ended the call, pocketing his phone again.

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“Daken?”

Daken turned his eyes to look at Zach. “Hm?”
“... Are you okay? Do you wanna... go over to the Avengers’ place or something?” Zach asked, giving him a worried look.

“No,” Daken shook his head. He’d considered that dozens of times already. What was the likelihood that Johnny would even be there right now? He could ask Gambit, but if Johnny hadn’t called him by now, he didn’t need Daken pestering him. “It’s fine.”

“... Okay,” Zach nodded, looking down at the workbook in his lap.

“Did you ask me something?” Daken asked. He hadn’t been paying attention. He needed to pay attention. He was worrying his child.

Zach shrugged. “Nah. Just whining.”

“I’m sorry for drifting.”

“It’s okay,” Zach looked back up at him, his brow furrowed. He was still worried. Daken debated whether he should use pheromones to soothe Zach’s concern.

“I’m listening now,” Daken assured him.

Zach pursed his lips for a moment, looking unsure, and then started telling him about Nga’s weird theories and arguments regarding the wendigo curse, while simultaneously jotting down numbers and solving equations in his workbook. Daken tried to devote his attention to the conversation, both to alleviate Zach’s anxiety and distract him from his own. Then a sound caught at his ear, growing near enough, loud enough, to distinguish that it wasn’t the sound of a common car engine, at least not common in this decade. That was the rumble of a perfectly restored late-50s engine.

Daken climbed to his feet and turned around to see the Sunliner roll into view and turn onto the school’s half-circle driveway. He stood frozen for a moment as he watched Johnny pull up to the middle and idle the engine. He was wearing dark sunglasses and his gaze was fixed straight forward. Daken turned back to Zach and crouched down, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Zach, if Logan’s not around tonight, will you please make sure Bellona eats dinner?” he asked softly.

“Okay. Sure,” Zach nodded, looking back up at him, brown pinched again.

“Thank you,” Daken whispered and stood again. He walked across the grass, pulled the passenger’s door open, and climbed in next to Johnny. “Where are we going?” he asked softly.

Johnny hesitated for a moment; he obviously hadn’t planned that far ahead. “… Pick a direction?”

“South,” Daken said.

“South,” Johnny agreed and put the car into gear.

They drove for a few minutes with nothing but the sounds of the engine and the park, before Johnny murmured, “HERBIE, Pandora.”

“Which station would you like to hear, Johnny?” HERBIE’s voice replied from the retrofitted modern dash-interface.

Johnny was quiet, frowning, having trouble making decisions. “Eighties new wave,” Daken said.

A-Ha started pouring out of the stereo and Johnny relaxed minutely. “… Thank you,” he whispered; Daken barely caught it over the music.
He reached over and laid his hand on Johnny’s shoulder for a minute. While they were inside the city, there would be too much gear-shifting to bother trying for his hand. He thought he might have heard another tiny thanks before Johnny went silent again, staring straight ahead as he drove.

Daken dipped into his pocket and pulled out his phone, starting a new text thread, and thumbed a quick message into it.

*I need a raincheck.*

He set the phone down on his thigh for a minute before it dinged twice, and he lifted it to read the response.

*I checked its not raining*  
*Are you okay*

Daken stared at it blankly for a moment and then thumbed back.

*I'm fine.*

He pursed his lips and slid the phone back into his pocket.

“Something up?” Johnny asked, not taking his eyes off the road or putting any real inflection in his voice. “HERBIE, volume to half.”

“Just calling in a raincheck,” Daken sighed, leaning against the door slightly, positioning himself to keep an eye on Johnny without straining his neck. “It wasn’t important.”

“Who?”

“Drake.”

Johnny frowned slightly. His mouth started to form a word, then aborted and closed, before trying again. “... You had a date?”

“Probably not,” Daken shook his head. “He’s too ‘good’ for the likes of me.”

“You’re on the side of the angels now. You’re even a teacher,” Johnny pointed out. “And it’s not like he never did anything wrong.”

“The X-Men is the ultimate symbol of mutant hypocrisy and internalized bigotry, and he is the last self-loathing legacy still sticking it out. I’m sure marginalizing abused mutants will be a very important part of ‘Xavier’s Dream’ that he’s been taught to uphold,” Daken replied, glancing at the dash but not bothering to focus on it. “Maybe I’m a wolf in the flock. At best, I’m a charity case.”

“You said before that he ‘wanted’ you,” Johnny noted.

“And maybe he tries to rationalize that into affection sometimes... Mostly we fight,” Daken shrugged.

“But you had plans tonight?”

“Plans aren’t reality... Plans are nothing,” Daken sighed, looking back at Johnny. “He wants to talk.”

“Do you know what he wants to talk about?” Johnny tilted his head slightly, glancing momentarily at Daken.
"... Part of that thing where I’m not good enough for him," Daken replied. Talking about something, something completely unrelated to what had happened in the sky earlier that day, seemed to be relaxing Johnny a bit. "He’s attracted to me physically, but he doesn’t like how I am... He doesn’t like being reminded what I am."

“A killer?”

“My father’s a killer too, and they all blindspot that,” Daken scoffed. “No, Drake has a problem with whores. But then so many people do, don’t they? Isn’t it ironic that church-people seem to make the biggest fuss about it? I am fairly certain there was something in that book about forgiving whores.”

“I think there might have also been something about the whore maybe forgiving herself and moving on with her life and maybe not calling herself ‘whore’ all the time anymore,” Johnny murmured.

Daken frowned at him. “... You too?”

“I- I worry about you internalizing stuff that was done to you too much,” Johnny explained, glancing at Daken again. “And, I mean, I know you’ve ‘reclaimed’ some things like the name, to ‘own’ them or take power from them or something. But... it doesn’t feel like that’s what’s happening when you call yourself ‘whore’.”

Daken pursed his lips and turned his head, looking straight out the windshield for a few moments, before deciding to just skip past the digression. “Anyway, he was after me the other day to talk about it,” he said. “He tried to corner me when I was coming back from a run. I told him I needed a shower, and he started pushing.”

“... Did you try mentioning to him that you’re borderline-narcotic when you’re sweaty?” Johnny asked.

“My reasons for putting him off became irrelevant the moment he decided that ‘no’ wasn’t an acceptable answer,” Daken snapped.

“Okay, yeah. Got to arrange problems into their proper hierarchy,” Johnny nodded appeasingly.

“... He apologized,” Daken said. He closed his eyes for a moment and turned back to Johnny again. “That’s the cycle. He doesn’t like what I say, he snaps, he gets forceful... Then he apologizes... So is it a date? It probably shouldn’t be, should it?”

“You’re asking the wrong person,” Johnny shook his head. “I wouldn’t know a healthy relationship if it slapped me in the face.”

“I don’t think a healthy relationship is supposed to slap you in the face,” Daken noted.

“Oh shit, really? I should write that down,” Johnny said.

Daken looked away and sucked in his bottom lip, biting it for a moment before digging into the subject again. “There’s been... a lot of hitting. He hits me, I hit him. Maybe not ‘a lot’ by volume, but by degree,” he said, excessively vague and rambling. “The first time, he had every reason to be scared that I’d taken a student, my main annoyance was that it took them so long to notice one of their wards was missing. Drake wasn’t wrong for trying to neutralize me, but... the way he attacked me, he was relying completely on my healing factor to pull me through it,” Daken explained, bringing his hands together in his lap, fidgeting, gouging into the skin with his nails. “It would have killed anyone else... It hurt.”
“He shouldn’t have done that,” Johnny said softly. “He glazes people all the time. He could have just immobilized you.”

“He was trying to prove something... I don’t think he even knew what, though,” Daken shook his head. “Or maybe I just inspire violent thoughts in him. He wouldn’t be the first that was true for.”

“Bobby’s not a psychopath like that guy.”

“There’s been more than one. And psychopaths aren’t the only people whose thoughts drift to dark places,” Daken shrugged, dragging a thumbnail up the length of the opposite palm. “Maybe I just come off as a safe guinea pig on which to explore those whims without consequence.”

Johnny reached across the seats and put his hand on top of Daken’s. They were at a light, and with the onset of rush-hour and as far back as they were, it would probably take at least two cycles to get past the intersection; no need to shift out of first gear for a while. “You’re not a guinea pig, and you’re nobody’s outlet. You don’t deserve to be hurt, and anybody who wants to use you that way doesn’t deserve you.”

Daken bit his lip again. His breath shuddered slightly on the next inhale, and he pulled his own hands away from each other and turned the left over to meet Johnny’s, lacing their fingers. “You never hurt me... You pushed me over once, but I was wearing that mask,” he said. “All you saw was a stranger breaking into your house.”

“Yeah, you were being super shady,” Johnny sighed, shaking his head. “... Did I apologize? I can’t remember.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for. Your reaction was...”

“I’m sorry.”

“... You like to apologize for things you shouldn’t,” Daken said, looking up to watch him again. “That’s why you make such a good patsy... doormat... pet.”

“Pet...” Johnny gave a tired little huff and urged the car forward a few lengths before stopping to wait through another rotation. “Which one was I for you?”

Daken leaned his head to the side and considered. “What’s halfway between a patsy and a sugar-daddy? You got me the nicest toys...”

“Reed gave you the toys,” Johnny pointed out.

“I stole some too,” Daken hummed. “He wouldn’t have been so accommodating or forgiving if I weren’t your ‘friend’.”

“I guess it’s a good thing we’re over then. I’ve got nothing to offer you now,” Johnny said.

Daken squeezed Johnny’s hand and lifted it to his face, kissing the knuckles then pressing his cheek to the back of it. “If there’s anything you don’t have, I’m sure I can live without it,” he said.

They were both quiet for a few minutes, New Order filling the silence. Finally, Johnny mumbled, “Green light,” and Daken let him go to work the gear shift as the car rolled on to the next block. When they paused at the next red light, he glanced over again. “... Are we talking about this like a real thing, or are we pretending?”

Daken looked out the windshield and chewed his lip again, trying to come up with an answer and
not having one. He was roused from his thoughts by a new voice, calling loudly from outside the car. “Johnny Storm!” Daken and Johnny both turned to see a man hurrying through the stopped traffic from the far side of the street. His phone was raised up near head-level as he closed the distance; he must be shooting video. “Johnny Storm! Ken Ellis, Daily Bugle! Where were you when the Fantastic Flair was seen in the sky over midtown? Were you the one to discover it was a prank? How did you feel?” the man demanded. When he’d started talking, Johnny had stiffened, his breath had faltered, his mouth had dropped open slightly in miserable horror; by the time the reporter had finished, Johnny was crumpling forward against the steering wheel, breath coming out in hysterical puffs, almost sobs.

Daken unbuckled his seatbelt with one hand and grabbed Johnny’s arm with the other, squeezing roughly. “Switch seats,” he ordered sharply and then pushed his door open and got out, walking around the front of the car. Driving while in hysterics was bad road-safety, and circling the car gave Daken a reason to approach the reporter. “GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM HIM!” he shouted, holding up his right hand and extending his outer claws.

The reporter’s eyes widened and he turned the phone’s camera on Daken, taking a backstep. “Sir, I am a member of the free press--”

“No, you’re a jay-walker! Get back on the sidewalk, you goddamned vulture!” Daken snapped. The reporter retreated, staying out of range as Daken reached the driver’s side door. Johnny had climbed over to the passenger’s seat and out of the way, giving Daken enough time to get seated and put the car into gear before traffic moved forward again. At the next stop, Daken turned to look at him; Johnny had his knees drawn up and was hugging his legs, face hidden. “... Johnny, put your seatbelt on,” Daken said softly and started manipulating the controls to close the car’s top. As the back compartment opened, he watched Johnny comply with the request. “... HERBIE, full volume.”

The radio came back up to Johnny’s preferred volume setting as Daken got the top closed and made his way to the interstate. Johnny stayed quiet for a while, then eventually started softly singing along with the stereo. He seemed to be content with not talking for now, and so Daken let himself be lulled into the rhythm of the music and the traffic as they made their escape from the city.

After two hours, Jersey sprawl was finally letting them go, and as Daken glanced at the time displayed on the dash-interface it occurred to him that there might be a drawback to getting out into more rural country. “HERBIE, nearest restaurant south of here?” he called.

“Hajime Japanese Express,” HERBIE replied.

“Oh, I doubt it,” Daken rolled his eyes and heard a soft chuckle from Johnny. “Farther on?”

“Multiple dining options in Dayton or Jamesburg,” HERBIE answered.

“That’s good. I skipped lunch,” Johnny murmured.

That probably wasn’t helping his equilibrium any, and had likely contributed to his breakdown in front of the reporter. “We’ll get you to some dinner soon,” Daken said.

They were quiet again for a while, and then shortly after leaving the turnpike, Johnny tapped the dashboard and pointed. “Cherries,” he said. In a parking lot ahead of them were a couple of folding tables shaded by a canopy. A hand-painted plywood sign declared ‘Fresh Picked Cherries’.

“Cherries aren’t dinner, Johnny,” Daken said.
“Cherries are dessert,” Johnny retorted and started patting himself and searching through the glovebox and other compartments as Daken pulled into the parking lot. “Cash cash cash...”

“I have cash,” Daken said, setting the break. “If you can’t remember to carry paper money, you should probably never leave the city.”

“I wasn’t really thinking a lot...” Johnny mumbled.

“It’s okay. Stay there. I’ll be right back.” Daken bought five pounds of cherries in a paper bag from the girl at the stand, and as soon as he’d set them down back in the car, one was in Johnny’s mouth. “Those haven’t been washed,” he sighed.

“Oh my God, I care so much,” Johnny shot back through a full mouth.

“Cherries still aren’t dinner.”

“Stop being a mom,” Johnny snapped. “You’re not...” he trailed off and went quiet.

“... We’re almost to the main drag,” Daken said softly.

When they walked into a small Americana restaurant, the hostess did a double-take as she approached them, then she glanced toward the large window behind them, through which the Sunliner could be seen, and then back at them, eyes wide. Daken frowned as she looked down, collected herself and then picked up a couple of menus. “Table for two?”

“Yes, please,” Daken nodded. His phone gave a ding as they followed her to a booth along a painted brick wall, and he pulled it out of his pocket and read the message as he slid onto the seat.

*Is Johnny okay*

Daken bit down on his tongue until he tasted blood.

“What is it?” Johnny asked, then glanced up at the hostess. “Coke?”

“Yes sir. And would you like anything to drink, sir?” she asked, looking at Daken.

“Black tea,” Daken replied and then waited until she’d walked away. “... Drake is asking after you.”

“Me?”

“I’m trying to decide if he’s being sarcastic.”

Johnny gave a shrug. “Text is hard to tell. You could just ask.”

Daken swished his thumb quickly over the ‘keypad’.

*Are you being sarcastic?*

A response came back before the screen display had the chance to time out and darken.

*No im worried*

Daken blew out an annoyed sigh.

*Of course he’s not okay.*
He shoved the phone back into his pocket and picked up his menu. As he was glancing over the third page, No Doubt started playing from under the table suddenly and Johnny pulled out his phone, giving it a frown but opting not to screen his phone calls as he brought it to his ear. “What?” he asked and then said, “I’m fine. Whatever. I’m-- No. No, I’m busy right now. I’m fine. I’m hanging up now.” He pulled the phone away and gave it a puzzled and annoyed look as he ended the call. Then it started up with No Doubt again a moment later. Johnny gave a small, annoyed snarl and brought it to his ear again. “Take a hint, Pete. I’m turning on do-not-disturb mode now. Bye.”

“Something wrong?” Daken asked.

“You said Bobby was asking about me?” Johnny glanced up at him. “Like, asking how I am?”

“Yes.”

“So’s Peter,” Johnny muttered, looking back down at his phone’s screen and frowning.

“... Peter Parker? The moron who accidentally lost the Baxter Building? You’re still friends with him?” Daken raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve been friends with him since we were teenagers. Longer than anybody else I know,” Johnny sighed and shook his head. “It’s just... kinda weird, him calling not five minutes after Bobby asked about me.”

Daken bit his lip and gazed out into the room for a minute. “The hostess recognized you when we walked in. What was odd though, was that she seemed to recognize me too... and then she looked out at your car,” he said quietly.

Johnny gave him a puzzled look. “What does that mean?”

“... I think it means that reporter’s video just went viral,” Daken said quietly.

Johnny’s face fell into a look of vague horror as he blanched, then flushed, then put a knuckle in his mouth and bit down on it. He was holding that pose when their waitress appeared, holding a tray with their drinks. “How are we doing this evening? Here’s your coke, si--” she started with a slightly stilted cheer.

Johnny snapped his eyes up to her and demanded, “Are people watching me cry on the internet?!?”

The waitress froze like a deer in headlights. “... I... Um... That’s...”

“Thank you,” Daken said calmly, reaching up and to take the drinks off of her tray and set them down. “I’ll have the chuck burger with sauteed onions and mushrooms, and the vegetable side.”

“Y- Yes. Of course,” the waitress chirped nervously, pulling an order pad out of her apron and scribbling that down.

“Forget dinner. Bring me a stupid-huge slice of chocolate cake,” Johnny said, putting his elbows down on the table and leaning against them.

“Ignore that,” Daken told the waitress. “Johnny, just get a burger or something.”

“Stop mothering me!” Johnny half-shouted, glaring at him.

“... Johnny, making yourself sick is not going to help anything,” Daken said quietly, holding his
eyes. “Skipping lunch has almost certainly added to how badly you’re feeling right now.”

“Has it occurred to you that I don’t want to feel better?” Johnny hissed, narrowing his eyes.

“Yes,” Daken nodded. “But I’m asking you, please, eat some meat. Please. If you can’t do this for yourself, please do it for me.”

Johnny’s face crumbled and he squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lip for a moment, before holding his menu up to the waitress and saying in a wavering, pinched voice, “Chuck with bacon and swiss.”

“Did- Did you want fries or vegetables?” the waitress asked awkwardly, her cheeks red with embarrassment at witnessing the little meltdown.

“Fries.”

“Okay... Is there anything else?”

“That should be fine. Thank you,” Daken replied. After the waitress made a hasty retreat, he leaned forward and reached both hands across the table. “Johnny,” he murmured. Johnny reached back without hesitating and they held each other’s hands, arms rested on the table. “I wasn’t raised to be a ‘good’ person. I’m not sure I can be, and I’m not sure I want to be... But I’m not out to hurt you, which seems to put me in the better-half of your ex-paramours,” he said softly, as Johnny lifted his gaze to meet Daken’s. “If you still want me, you’re the only one who’s ever just been good to me, and I will try to be what you need.”

Johnny bit his lip and swallowed, blinking quickly. “... I can’t do alone,” he whimpered.

Chapter End Notes

Back on the angst-wagon with a big TBC. This arch is going to be five parts, I roughed them while I was away from my usual tech the past few weeks and will work on getting them edited and ready to post soon. This one’s going to be a bit of a rollercoaster, but there was that loose thread I’ve been needing to tie up.
 **Daken and Johnny go to the beach to talk.**

**Chapter Notes**

**Trigger Warning:**
Suicidal thoughts
Self-harm

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Breaking into a nature preserve after hours involved driving three and a half miles on a narrow, two-lane road through a tidal floodplain and around two not particularly secure ‘security’ barriers with the headlights out. It would have been an ill-advised plan if the Sunliner’s HERBIE interface didn’t have an infrared display. Johnny had wanted to go to the beach, and that wish took them out onto the Virginia sandbars as twilight was fading into darkness. Now they were sitting in the sand, listening to the waves, and eating cherries as they watched the moon rise over the blackened water.

“If only New York had any undeveloped beach,” Daken sighed out of the darkness.

“It’s got a few beach parks,” Johnny pointed out with a little shrug.

“They’re miniscule and crawling with excessively pungent masses,” Daken countered.

Johnny chuckled. “I’m pretty sure the only reason we have this place to ourselves is because we’re not supposed to be here,” he noted and then turned to look at Daken, mostly silhouette now. “You going to move to Virginia for the beaches?”

“Hm, do I want to be queer and interracial in a confederate state? Let me think about that a while.” Daken scoffed.

Johnny turned his head forward again to spit out a cherry pit. He put a hard blow behind it to try and see how far he could make it go, but the pit disappeared into the darkness, leaving that a mystery. He then picked up the cherry bag and moved it out of the way so he could scoot up against Daken. Daken wrapped his arm around Johnny and tilted his head to give him better access as Johnny nuzzled his neck. “Maybe we should run away somewhere with beaches and no rednecks and nobody who knows us,” he murmured.

“Whole new life?” Daken asked with a soft sigh.

“Mhmm,” Johnny agreed, kissing his warm skin and combing his fingers upward through Daken’s mane from nape to crown. “... Do you want to run away with me forever?”

Daken was silent for a while before replying in a whisper. “Four years ago I would have said ‘yes’ without a second thought,” he said.

“Not anymore?”

Daken was silent again and his discomfort was palpable. He didn’t want to say it, he didn’t want to rub salt in the wound, because of what had happened today.

“You’ve got a family now,” Johnny sighed. “... I wasn’t being serious with that. Not really. Just a
fantasy.” He knew that Daken would know he was lying.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Johnny shook his head. “It’s not like I could really get away. I’ve plastered myself across too many magazines and crap. I’d probably have to go off-world to get somewhere nobody knows me… And I think I’m done with space. Space is dumb.”

Daken leaned into him a little more. “… I can’t run away, but I could be closer if you wanted.”

Johnny sighed, kissing his neck again and then giving it a soft bite. “We’ve got some skin-to-skin right now. If you want closer than skin-to-skin, I think in the sand might not be the best place for it,” he murmured, but put a hand on Daken’s thigh and squeezed despite that.


“Closer than across the park?” Johnny asked softly, and gave Daken a gentle push, to which Daken responded easily, laying back in the sand and letting Johnny climb over him. “You mean move in with me?” Johnny asked, settling down on top of him, holding himself up just a little on his elbows with hips cradled between Daken’s thighs.

“If you want me to,” Daken whispered.

“Yes,” Johnny breathed and kissed him long and deep. He shoved away a prickle of anxiety, feelings of wrongness that had been creeping up on him all night. Things he didn’t want or need to analyze, because today was crappy enough already.

“Rogue won’t like it, of course,” Daken noted, when they came up for air.

“Rogue can go to hell. It was my money that rebuilt the damn place,” Johnny replied and kissed him again. Daken slid his hands under Johnny’s shirt and drew his nails slowly up his sides, scraping enough to burn just a little bit. Johnny moaned into his mouth and let his elbows slide outward in the sand a bit, lowering him to press more heavily down on Daken. When the kiss ended, he started laying smaller ones along Daken’s jaw. “I was thinking about killing myself today… I decided to find you instead. Last time… Last time I got tired of living, you were gone… I came close a few times, but… I had to keep breathing because of the kids… Now they’re gone.”

Daken was so quiet for a moment that Johnny would have thought he was holding his breath if he couldn’t feel the rise and fall of his chest. “… I fantasized about dying together,” he whispered. “So many times… It’s not that I really wanted to die every time I thought it… I wanted to die with you.”

Johnny kissed him hard. He wondered if he was sick for thinking that was the most romantic thing he’d ever heard. Of course he was sick. And Daken was the only person he had who really understood what it was like to die over and over. So many times. Hundreds of times. Torn apart, crushed, impaled, bludgeoned into pulp, until it all blurred together. Maybe the sickest thing was that Johnny loved him for that more than anything else. Maybe that was the only thing distinguishing ‘love’ from ‘like’. And maybe that took it a step past ‘sick’ and into ‘wrong’, ‘unfair’ and ‘cruel’ territory. Johnny broke the kiss and drew back an inch, drawing a shaky breath past the sudden knot in his throat. He could feel tears fighting to escape his eyes.

“Our positions are reversed now. You couldn’t let go because of the children then… Now I have Zach, so I can’t…” Johnny heard him swallow laboriously. “… But if you asked me to, I don’t think I could say ‘no’.”
He never could, could he? The breath froze in Johnny’s lungs for a minute, and then he sobbed painfully. He scrambled off of Daken, stumbling backwards; his foot twisted against the loose, dry sand and he came down awkwardly on his ass as his legs crumpled under him, then pushed himself back a few feet more, babbling hysterically. “Nonononononono… Oh God oh God…” he sobbed again. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

“Johnny?” Daken’s voice rang with worry and Johnny could see his dark silhouette moving as he rolled to his knees and followed.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to do this to you,” Johnny blubbered. “I didn’t mean to. I didn’t understand, and then it was too late!”

“You didn’t do anything to me,” Daken said soothingly, crawling up next to Johnny and putting a gentle hand on his arm.

Every breath got easier and hysteria ebbed away too quickly. Daken was using his powers to calm Johnny down. He had to hang onto this. He could be rational and non-hysterical, but he couldn’t let this conversation stop. With the talk about Daken moving in, tonight was definitely a precipice, so Johnny couldn’t procrastinate on this anymore. “You know that’s not true. Part of you knows it, at least,” he whispered shakily. “You didn’t come to me. When you started living at the school, you knew I was just across the park, but I didn’t see you until I found out a week later and came to find you. You didn’t come to me because you knew. Down inside, you knew. These last few weeks, we weren’t even together and you’ve tried to ‘break up’ with me two or three times!” He bit down hard on his lip for a moment before saying, “You don’t want this. We both know it, and we’re just pretending.”

“No. No, I was just scared of using you,” Daken protested.

“... You said this afternoon that I was the only one who never hurt you,” Johnny said, clenched his teeth, then continued. “That’s why you’re chasing this right now. You are scared. You’re scared that what’s behind every other door is worse than me. Because I never hit you. But saying I never hurt you? I’m doing it right now! I’ve been doing it all night, haven’t I?” he demanded.

“No.”

“What I need. What will make me feel better. If I want it,” Johnny spat. “Your feelings just aren’t even in the equation are they? You’re just telling yourself that you’ll feel whatever you need to feel. You’ll be whoever you need to be. Like always. Like always. Because that’s what you were trained to do, right? Be who and what people want. And your feelings don’t matter because your feelings aren’t real.”

“Johnny--”

“I didn’t love you.”

There was sudden silence. Johnny thought that this time Daken really had stopped breathing.

“I’m sorry!” Johnny choked out and then bit his lip for a second before forcing himself to continue. “Back then-- Back when it started… I- I thought it was just sex! I thought we were just having fun! I didn’t think about it more than that until you started… You started acting like it was a lot more than that. And- And I didn’t even know what to do! It completely blindsided me! But you were so into it and so then I… I started wanting it to be more…”

“... My powers?” Daken said in a tiny whine.
“No!” Johnny snapped immediately. “No! *Fuck* that! Don’t you *dare*!” He reached out and grabbed Daken’s arm. “No! It was *not* your *fucking powers!* You *always*— I know you’re way more insecure about it than you let on, but I was *not* under your *spell* or some shit!” he insisted fiercely. “It *wasn’t* your powers. It was because you were so *smart* and *funny* and *beautiful* and objectively the least destructive ongoing relationship I’d had in a *decade!*”

“I shot you!”

“The fact that you weren’t trying to *kill* me puts you at the top of the damn list for healthy life choices!” Johnny snapped back. “After I realized you were falling, I *wanted* to make it real… I’m sorry… I wanted it to be real *so much*, but it’s *not*."

“It could be,” Daken protested, his voice was so small and fragile. “I could try harder.”

“… I don’t think you’re the problem, Daken,” Johnny whispered. “I was in it as a hook-up when you were falling in love. That’s… I’m a *jerk*.”

“No.” He could see Daken shaking his head, silhouetted against the deep purple-blue sky. “I changed the terms of the relationship without consulting you. That’s definitely me at fault.”

“*Falling* isn’t a ‘fault’, Daken,” Johnny said, squeezing his eyes shut for a minute and swallowing. “… Do you love me now?”

Johnny opened his eyes and looked at Daken again. It hurt so much. “… I think I love you the wrong way… I love you selfishly. Because I don’t want to be alone. Because I’m afraid I’ll never do better, so I don’t want to let you go… Because you understand things I could never explain to anybody else… What it’s like when pain stops meaning ‘stop’. When you can’t quite tell if you’re alive or dead because both those words have stopped meaning anything. When a ‘day’ starts with waking up and ends with dying… Who the hell else could I possibly talk to about that shit?”

“That’s enough,” Daken said softly. “That’s good enough for me. I don’t need more than that.”

Johnny bit his lip again, as long as he could before he had to open his mouth for a breath because his nose was too congested. “… Daken, we are both *so so* broken,” he whimpered.

“We can fix each other,” Daken suggested.

“I don’t think we can,” Johnny shook his head. “Our brokens aren’t complimentary… We’re all jagged edges for each other.”

“… Don’t take this away,” Daken pleaded in a whisper. “I need this. I want it as much as you.”

He was lying. Not to Johnny really, but to himself. “Why did you fall for me?” Johnny asked.

He could see Daken dip his head slightly, looking down. “… You treated me like a person… You made me feel like a human being.”

Johnny was silent for a minute, feeling sicker than before. “So… you love me for treating you the way you should expect and demand that *everybody* treat you?” he asked quietly.

“I didn’t have to demand it with you.”

“Daken…” Johnny swallowed and his breath shook. “That’s because I try to treat everybody that way.” He wet his lip and then gritted his teeth for a few seconds. “… The thing you built your love
He heard Daken’s breath catch, and then a little hiccup sound, and then shaking, hysterical little pants.

“I’m so sorry,” Johnny whispered. “I swear I’m not trying to be mean, and I’m so sorry, but we can’t pretend anymore. I’m sorry.”

Daken made a little, wordless whine. Johnny reached out and pulled him in. Daken leaned heavily against him and clung as he cried into Johnny’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry… I’m sorry…” Johnny whispered, petting his hair and choking on his breath a bit. “…What you felt, your love, it’s valid, it’s real… but it’s not the kind of foundation you can build a Forever on… And I knew something was wrong, and I should have asked questions… I’m sorry…”

“I don’t… care… I’ll still be yours… You don’t have to… be alone… ever,” Daken whimpered brokenly. “I’ll be whatever… you want.”

Johnny thought he might puke right then. He swallowed and took a few deep breaths to get it under control enough to speak. “No… You’re scared that you can’t do better, but you can.” He resisted the urge to kiss the side of Daken’s head; he didn’t want to send mixed signals. “You’re going to be okay,” Johnny whispered.

“Unless you want every amatuer paparazzi in town to swarm this place, I recommend you wait in the car,” Daken said, pushing his door open as Johnny set the break.

“Hang on, use my card for--”

“Your card with your name on it? That would rather defeat the purpose of you staying in the car, wouldn’t it?” Daken scoffed, rolling his eyes as he stepped out onto the pavement in front of the hotel main entrance.

“The impromptu road trip was my fault. You shouldn’t--”

“I have money, Johnny,” Daken snapped, keeping his volume low, though he couldn’t quite manage soft. “Probably significantly more than you, since you sank every dime into a trust for your idiot frat house.”

Johnny looked back at him with brow pinched and lip between his teeth, silent for a moment before asking, “What do you need me to say right now?”

“I need you to stop arguing,” Daken growled, glaring, then closed his eyes and dipped his head slightly. “You’ve never argued when I paid for things before.”

“… Sorry,” Johnny whispered.

“I’ll be right back,” Daken said and pushed the door shut.

He walked into the office and exchanged clipped dialogue with the clerk at the desk, then strode back to the car; all of his surroundings not immediately vital to the task at hand were an apathetic blur. He climbed back into the car, a pair of terry robes under his arm. “Park along the north side,” he said. “They have laundry service, so we won’t have to smell like beach all the way back.”
‘You don’t like the smell of beaches?’ Johnny asked, putting the car into gear and pulling it around in a u-turn.

‘When we’re actually at the beach, the predominant smell is the salt breeze,’ Daken said, leaning his arm tiredly against the side of the car. ‘After we leave, the smell that clings to our clothes is all the dead and desiccated plankton rotting in the sand.’

‘Gotcha,’ Johnny nodded, pulling into a spot along the side of the building. He set the break again and turned off the engine. ‘So...’ he started and then faded out, apparently unable to think of a follow-up.

‘Come on,’ Daken said, getting out and heading for a door in the corner of the building. His keycard opened it, and he walked in, looking back over his shoulder to hold the door until Johnny caught its edge and followed him in.

Johnny trailed after him up the concrete stairwell, and as they started down the hallway of the second floor, Daken heard and smelled his amorphous anxiety sharpen. ‘... Daken?’ he called softly. Daken ignored it, finding the door number he was looking for and fitting the keycard into it. ‘... You just got one room, didn’t you.’

‘You dragged me to Virginia. Don’t complain,’ Daken replied, pushing on the door and walking in.

‘I’m not com...’ Johnny’s voice petered out again and then he gave a heavy sigh as he took in the room with a single king size bed instead of the more common double-queen layout. ‘... Daken, we’ve got to stop pretending,’ he said softly.

‘You were talking about suicidal thoughts earlier. You shouldn’t be alone tonight,’ Daken said, and then turned around and walked back to Johnny without looking at him, reaching past him to push the door shut. ‘Neither should I.’

‘This isn’t going to help.’ Johnny put his hands gently on Daken’s shoulders, not really holding, not pushing him back.

‘I’m serious... If you leave me alone tonight, I’m sure I’ll spend the next few hours bleeding myself,’ Daken whispered.

Johnny hesitated for another moment and then wrapped his arms around Daken, pulling him in. ‘I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...’ he said near Daken’s ear, his voice cracking. ‘I never wanted to hurt you. I’m sorry... I don’t see-- I don’t see... Breaking it off hurts you, but letting it go on when I know it’s not working would hurt you too. Probably worse... I’m sorry.’

‘... I need to be held,’ Daken whimpered, squeezing his eyes shut tight. ‘... You don’t have to fuck me, but I need to be next to someone tonight...’

‘... Okay,’ Johnny nodded minutely. ‘... I want to do what’s right for you. Whatever you need from me... I think letting you go is what you need from me, even if it hurts...’

Daken drew a shuddering breath and swallowed hard, then took a step backward. Johnny let him go. Daken didn’t lift his gaze to see what expression he was being given as he wet his lip and spoke. ‘I need to take a shower. The smell.’

‘Okay,’ Johnny said again fading back another step farther away.

‘... Don’t sit on the bed. If you sit on the bed in those clothes, it’ll smell like dead plankton all
“Okay… Not a bath, right?”

Daken paused, staring at nothing for a moment. It was an innocuous enough question; if a third-party had overheard it, they might have thought Johnny was just concerned about how long he meant to occupy the bathroom. But Daken had told Johnny his preferred cutting habits once, so he knew what Johnny was really asking. “… Just a shower,” he said softly. “I’ll be quick.”

“Okay.”

Daken dropped the hotel robes on the counter and hurried numbly through the motions, getting himself into the shower before it had entirely heated up, and staring at the tile ahead of him as he unsheathed a claw and slid it down the opposite arm. He closed his eyes and sighed. He couldn’t let himself sink deep into this sick relief, but he needed to let off some of the pressure. He gave himself one more slice before setting about the task of scrubbing the smell of beach-sand off of him with the tiny, cheap hotel soap. Dropping the washcloth carelessly on the floor of the tub, Daken pressed his hands to the tile and leaned against them, letting the water fall on his back and neck for a few minutes as he watched it dribble down and off his nose. Finally he shut off the water and pressed his face into a towel, breathing in the smell of ‘unscented’ fabric softener for a moment, and then dried himself off and stepped out.

He pulled on one of the robes and tied it shut, gathered up his discarded clothes, paused with his hand on the doorknob for a few seconds, then made his way back out into the main room. “All yours,” he said softly.

Johnny had been sitting in one of the chairs at a tiny table by the window. “’Kay, thanks,” he said with a nod, pushing himself up. He walked past Daken into the bathroom as Daken pushed the closet next to the door open and found the empty bag hung inside with ‘laundry’ written in block-letters down its length.

He went to the table and deposited his belt and the contents of his pockets before stuffing his clothes into the bag and tossing it at the floor in front of the bathroom door. Daken stood still, watching the bag slump over on the carpet and continuing to stare in that direction as his eyes lost focus and he listened to the shower turn on. Mild nausea had settled in his stomach and was gradually increasing. But it had been hours since he ate dinner, he wouldn’t be able to vomit in any satisfying way if he tried. Daken shook his head, pushing that thought away, and walked to the bed.

He turned on the nightstand lamp and settled in, staring at the ceiling, zoning out to the rhythm of the shower. Time turned meaningless until the water stopped and Daken blinked several times, his eyes feeling dry. He let his head fall sideways on the pillow as the door opened and Johnny came out in the other bathrobe. “Put your clothes in the bag and hang it on the doorknob,” Daken instructed.

“Sure,” Johnny said quietly, stooping down to get it and doing as he was told.

Daken waited silently, watching him put their clothing outside and turn off the overhead light. He padded around the bed and climbed in as Daken switched off the lamp beside him. Once Johnny had settled back, Daken squirmed across the distance and lay against his side. “… I feel sick,” he whispered.

“… I’m sorry,” Johnny whispered back, fussing with the pillow to get in a position where he could wrap his arm around Daken without it falling asleep.
Daken bit his lip for a while, resting his head against Johnny’s collarbone. “... I’d be anything you asked me to be,” he said after a while. “I’d try harder.”

“You shouldn’t have to try to be in love,” Johnny said, finding the hand Daken had laid against his chest and squeezing it.

“People go to marriage counselors when infatuation wears off. Love takes effort. You hear that all the time,” Daken countered without any real energy.

“That’s supposed to mean being patient and compromising so a marriage doesn’t fall apart, not that you have to make yourself fall in love in the first place,” Johnny said softly.

“Yes. In the first place. For most of human history marriages were arranged based on social and economic factors,” Daken protested. “The spouses taught themselves to love each other…”

“You know Americans frown on arranged marriage pretty hard,” Johnny pointed out, lacking the flippant tone that might have normally underscored such a comment.

“That’s because Americans are simultaneously churlish and snobby,” Daken retorted. “… It was on the news. I saw it on the news. When they said you were dead. That’s how I found out… It hurt so much…” He bit his lip hard.

“I’m sorry,” Johnny whispered.

“And when I knew I was dying, I was relieved, because after- after all the shit, I wanted to be dead with you… But then you came back, and I was still dying…” Daken swallowed hard.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Did you think about me?” Daken asked, lifting his head a little. “When you martyred yourself to protect the world from the monsters in the Baxter Building’s closet, did I cross your mind at all?”

“I thought about you while I was in the Negative Zone,” Johnny whispered.

“No.” Daken pushed himself up on his elbow, shaking his head. “When you were sealing yourself inside the portal. Did you think about me then?”

“… No,” Johnny admitted.

Daken bit down on his lip again, tasting blood.

“… I’m sorry.”

“… You’re just confirming what I already knew,” Daken whispered and drew a shuddering, painful breath.

“I’m sorry… I’ve never been who you needed me to be.” Johnny reached up, stroking his knuckles along Daken’s cheek. “I’m sorry.”

“… Maybe I’m just too needy,” Daken said and swallowed, feeling tears now. He could count on one hand the times he’d cried since breaking from Romulus, for decades he’d thought that ability had been lost entirely, and now Johnny was going to make him cry a second time in one night.

“No… I just decided to stop living in the real world years ago… so I stopped paying attention,” Johnny’s breathing was shallow and tremulous. “I’m sorry I was so bad for you.”
Daken swallowed again, trying to clear the tightness in his throat. “You weren’t. If you hadn’t been there, maybe I would have followed Lester over the edge… You tethered me to a world where grace and decency had some value.”

“Then I let you down,” Johnny said softly.

“... After Emin and Uriel’s hold over me faded… I didn’t go to you,” Daken murmured, staring down at the contours of the robe crossed over Johnny’s chest, dimly illuminated by the numbers of the bedside clock. “You wouldn’t have been hard to find, but I didn’t try… I didn’t think about why, I didn’t want to think about why, I didn’t want to think about you at all… To me, you were still dead…”

“Daken--”

“You came to me. Because you were lonely. Because another Amaquelin sister had ground you beneath her heel… And today you came again,” Daken’s voice faded into a dry whisper, “Because you were lonely…”

“I’m selfish.”

“Not selfish. Not really. You give as much as you can whenever anybody asks,” Daken shook his head and swallowed again. “You gave your momentary billionaire status all to your ill-advised little charity.”

“Self-centric then, maybe.”

“Maybe I’m reading in.”

“No. No, you’re not,” Johnny whispered, putting his hand on Daken’s arm and holding it there, a comforting weight. “I pressured you, and you were trying to signal that you didn’t want it, weren’t you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what I want. I don’t know what I should want,” Daken shook his head and hiccupped.

“Did I make you doubt yourself?” Johnny asked.

“No. It’s Donna’s fault,” Daken said.

“I don’t know Donna.”

“You don’t want to know Donna.” Daken let his arm buckle and settled back against Johnny, curling into him a bit more and hiccupping again.

Johnny wrapped his arm snugly around him again. “... You should want someone who doesn’t treat you like a piece of ass.”

“You don’t.”

“I did. I didn’t know you, we’d never really had a chance to talk, and I just invited you to that hotel because you were hot and it sounded like a good time,” Johnny pointed out.

“... You weren’t mean,” Daken mumbled.

“I’m never mean… But all I saw at first was a hookup,” Johnny explained softly, hand petting down Daken’s arm. “I didn’t start really getting to know you at all until the pillowtalk after.”
“So I shouldn’t look for someone who wants me?” Daken asked skeptically.

“Daken, I don’t think you can find anybody who likes guys that doesn’t drop their jaw at you,” Johnny said. “But maybe you should be looking for somebody who’s not trying to get you in bed on the first date.”

“Drake’s turned me down three times,” Daken noted softly.

“… You talk about him a lot,” Johnny whispered. “You’ve mentioned him at least once every time I’ve seen you since you’ve been at the school.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t— I wasn’t complaining,” Johnny protested; it was only half a lie. “It’s just— It seems like you’re thinking about him a lot, and you made plans with him even though you were talking like you don’t think it could happen… Do you like him?”

Daken bit his lip for a minute, his stomach lurching with nausea again. “… I don’t know… He’s attractive.”

“Yeah. He’s adorable.”

“You can’t smell it… He smells lovely,” Daken explained softly.

“I guess I’ll have to take your word on that…” Johnny muttered.

“Sorry.”

“No, no, I’m sorry, I’m being a jerk,” Johnny said quickly. “I’m-- I don’t… I’m being weird about it, maybe because it’s someone I know. I’m not… I’m sorry.”

“… So tell me to stay away from him,” Daken whispered, clutching his hand around the fabric of Johnny’s robe. “I’ll listen.”

“I can’t-- I can’t make that call, Daken,” Johnny protested weakly. “… If you really feel scared around him, then that’s something to think about, but… Is it just physical attraction, or do you actually like something about him?”

“… He makes a lot of mistakes.”

“So… that’s a plus?”

“When you rub his nose in one, he doesn’t make that particular mistake again,” Daken whispered.

“… Okay… That is a genuine skill,” Johnny said.

“… He’s earnest… so much that he’s just raw with it,” Daken continued softly. “He should be jaded after what he’s been dragged through, but he’s not… He’s got no calluses. Everything hits him so hard… He’s still surprised every time he rediscovers that the world’s cruel…”

“So… he’s cute like a crying puppy?”

“… Instead of growing up and getting resigned to the fact that the world is cruel like he should, he just believes that it shouldn’t be…” Daken said, staring into the darkness. “… But then why is he?”

“Cruel?” Johnny asked.
“... Like a child, I suppose... stepping on ant hills... He had to be spanked and told he was causing pain...” Daken mused and sighed heavily.

“You mean the first time you met him?”

“Yes.”

“... He was confronting you as a super villain, and if we just ignore all the problematic elements that lead to you being categorized that way on the X-Men’s books... When I meet a guy on the street with super powers, who is clearly doing some terrorism or grand larceny or kidnapping a teenager... I’m going to go in fists-first,” Johnny said slowly, a hesitant tone in his voice. “Did Bobby go excessive force? Absolutely. But... the context of it all kind of muddies the waters... And now it’s a completely different context. He knows you. I don’t think he’d hurt you now, he doesn’t have a reputation for getting violent with people he’s close to.”

“There was the deathseed incident,” Daken murmured.

“Does that count?”

“No.”

“... I don’t think he would, but if he ever did, if he ever raised a hand to you, even just a rom-com slap, you should get out of there right away,” Johnny said firmly. “I know Hollywood glorifies the limp-wristed love-tap, but in real life that’s like a neon-lit warning sign.”

“... You think I should pursue him?” Daken asked.

“I can’t-- I can’t give you an answer here, Daken,” Johnny said with frustration twisting his voice. “My relationship history for the past decade alternates between girls stepping on my neck or kicking me in the face... I- I don’t have anything to give you here, it just sounds like maybe you like him.”

“... How would I know?”

“... I don’t have that answer either...” Johnny sighed.

Chapter End Notes

Super angsty chapter, I know, I know. Sorry. Do I devote too much angst to an unship? Maybe, it’s possible, but I kept feeling that I wanted to fully dissect this dangling thread because I was afraid of dismissing it too simplistically. I’m not sure, I may have made a bigger deal of that idea than was actually warranted, but I felt like I’d gotten a little too tangled after the garage scene so I wanted to untangle it.
Daken takes steps to get his shit together.

Chapter Notes

**Spoiler Warning** for *Fantastic Four* (2018), issues 2-3.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#).

Daken leaned leadenly against the side of the car, gazing out at the city slipping past as Tears for Fears washed over him. There had been a few hours of disjointed, ambling conversation through Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Jersey, but as they got closer to their destination, words had worn thin. Daken had stopped responding to Johnny’s attempts to engage him a while before the Holland Tunnel, instead letting his thoughts turn to static as his eyes failed to focus on the world.

He was still in a trance when the car stopped. After a minute, Johnny’s hand landed gently on his arm. “Daken?”

Daken blinked and swallowed and blinked again, finally realizing that the view in front of him was the front acre of the school. He took a deep breath and shook his head.

“You okay?”

He turned to look at Johnny. “… Honesty is what’s good for me? Facing the elements instead of throwing a blanket over myself?” he whispered.

Johnny’s gaze lowered and his brow furrowed. “… Probably? That seems like something a smart person would say… If you can do that, you’re doing better than me… But we both know you’re smarter than me.”

“You’re not stupid.”

“Yeah, I kinda know that,” Johnny nodded. “And maybe if I keep hanging around with normal-intelligence people, I’ll start to believe it… But you’re also stronger and more stubborn than me. You’ll probably figure things out a lot faster out of pride.”

“That’s possible,” Daken said, looking out the window again but not opening the door yet.

“You know this is because I care about you, right? If I didn’t care about you, maybe I wouldn’t care that I was using you… I’m not going to stop caring about you. Ever,” Johnny said in a soft, squeezed voice. “… Do you need space?”

“I don’t know,” Daken whispered.

“How about… I won’t call you, so you can have space if you need it. But if you call me, I promise I’ll pick up. Unless somebody is actively punching me in the face at that very moment, in which case I’ll call you back,” Johnny said. “If you don’t want to call me ever, you don’t have to… But-But I’ll take your call anytime you need to talk.”

“… You need someone to talk to,” Daken said, looking down. The point of yesterday’s odyssey had been to uplift Johnny as he came to terms with the possibility that his family was dead. And instead it had turned into being about Daken. Was that helpful? Did Johnny need someone to be more
pathetic and broken than him?

“There’s people back at the frat house,” Johnny said. “I’ve pretty much paid their rent in perpetuity, so they have to listen to me bitch… And I’ve got to talk to Ben.”

“... You don’t need me?” Daken asked, continuing to stare at the grass outside.

“I’m not your responsibility, Daken,” Johnny replied.

“Do. you. need. me?”

Johnny was quiet for a few moments. “... If I say ‘no’, it’ll probably sound like a lie. Because I feel sad and hollow and gross right now,” he said softly. “... But the logical part of my brain says that I’ve got a support-network. I don’t need to burden you, because I’ve got other people who can get me through this… people I wouldn’t be hurting by asking.”

“You’re not hurting me,” Daken whispered.

“I’m chaining you.”

Daken closed his eyes and pursed his lips, drawing a deep breath through his nose. “... There’s a certain kind of comfort to confinement...” he said at last. “A leash can be a lifeline when you don’t mind choking.”

“You’re past needing that,” Johnny said.

Daken opened his eyes and blinked a few times, then turned to look at him again. “... Have I outgrown you?” he asked.

“... Yeah. Maybe you did,” Johnny agreed, nodding.

“... Lately, I don’t think I like growing,” Daken said, unbuckling his seat belt and pushing the door open.

“You can call me anytime you need to, but I’m not going to pester you,” Johnny said again, squeezing Daken’s arm before withdrawing his hand.

“Okay,” Daken whispered, stepping out of the car. “I’ll call you... sometime.”

“When you feel like it. Not before that,” Johnny said.

“Okay,” Daken nodded and pushed the door shut. He turned away and started drifting up the front walk in a daze, ignoring the people walking and playing in the park behind him, and the few students dotting the lawn around him. He climbed the porch steps and felt a slight relief walking into the cooler, climate-controlled interior. Daken sighed, steps slowing for a moment, and then started toward the stairs, wanting the solitude of his suite. He was on the stairs as his ears registered running feet and then his focus sharpened at the sound of his name.

“Daken?”

Daken turned at the waist slightly and glanced back to see Drake pausing half a flight below him.

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?” Drake asked, a nervous cast to his face, scent conflicted with worry.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Daken countered in a monotone.
Drake pursed his lips for a moment, brow pinching a little more. “Just… You disappeared for almost twenty-four… The kids said you sent out a mass-text this morning canceling classes…”

“It’s Friday. I’m sure the students were happy enough to get a head start on the weekend,” Daken shrugged.

“And… you’re fine?” Drake asked taking another step upwards and pausing, watching him carefully to see if it was allowed.

“Perfectly,” Daken replied, not moving.

Drake kept climbing until he was just two steps below Daken. “So… Everything’s fine then?” he asked, tone and expression doubtful.

“Of course,” Daken said. “Why?”

“You… seem kind of…” Drake hesitated, glancing away.

“We drove down the coast,” Daken said quietly. “Stopped for dinner, and then started driving again until sunset… We watched the moon rise on a beach in Virginia. It was lovely. Then we got a hotel room for the night.”

Drake stared back at him for a few seconds and then looked down. “That… sounds nice,” he said quietly. He smelled of disappointment, but Daken couldn’t pick up any anger.

“It does, doesn’t it,” Daken agreed, watching him. “… You don’t have anything better to be doing?”

“I- I don’t have classes on Friday,” Drake said, shifting uncomfortably. “… I was worried.”

“I’m fine,” Daken said, turning his gaze forward again and continuing up the stairs.

“… Okay,” Drake said quietly behind him. His footsteps and scent didn’t follow. Didn’t give chase.

Daken summited the stairs and turned down the staff dormitory hallway, intent on his suite and a bath.

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Terry was just finishing writing up notes for his session with Martha Johansson when there was a knock on his office door. He minimized the window and turned in his chair, calling, “Yes?”

The door opened and Daken stepped in; he looked paler than usual and the anxiety and self-doubt were nearly tangible. “… Your student sessions are over?” he asked softly, pushing the door shut behind him.

“Yes,” Terry agreed, nodding.

Daken leaned against the back of the door. “I suppose with your family history, you would have sought a solid grounding in parapsychology while you were studying?” he asked.

“I did,” Terry said.

“… I was conditioned to register fear and loyalty as interchangeable… or maybe the same thing entirely,” Daken said quietly, looking down. “Pain as synonymous with affection… If, upon my first introduction to an individual, he came within a hair’s breadth of killing me, then if I were to
subsequently find myself attracted to him… would that merely be a factor of my conditioning?”

Terry bit his lip for a minute, considering that. Of course he knew that the Xavier Institute was going to be a challenge, but this was being thrown into the deep-end with lead shackles. “I don’t think I’m really familiar enough with your situation to make any judgment there,” he said slowly, shutting his computer and folding his hands on his knees. “You have your own therapist, right? They might be in a better position to answer that.”

“I doubt it,” Daken shook his head. “I’ve never spoken a word to her.”

Terry frowned, confused. “You’ve never spoken…?”

“The last six weeks she’s been trying to make me play board games. As if she thinks she can win me over with pedantry.” Daken scoffed.

“... Is there a reason you don’t want to talk to her?” Terry asked.

“A white, ‘normal’ woman with the luck or privilege to get through college and an advanced degree?” Daken said with a slight growl in his voice. “She has no right to judge me.”

“Judging you isn’t her job,” Terry pointed out.

“Everybody judges. It’s human nature. There’s no avoiding it,” Daken retorted.

“... So you want me to judge you instead?” Terry asked.


“Why not… Well, because we’re colleagues now, and treating you as a patient while also working side by side with you might be an uncomfortable dynamic,” Terry explained.

“Would it make you uncomfortable?” Daken asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

Terry tilted his head to the side and considered it, thinking of Abigail and Greer for a moment and then shaking his head. “I don’t think so. I’ve been in a similar position before,” he said.

“And I don’t like talking to strangers, outsiders, about my history or derangement,” Daken said in a quieter voice, looking down again and shaking his head slightly. “And while Rachel may be a sympathetic and particularly relatable ear, she doesn’t have the expertise to offer me much more than that.”

“So you don’t consider me an outsider?”

“You’re more like us than you are like them,” Daken shrugged. “You face the same trials and alienation.”

“And you consider the experience more important than being an ‘authentic mutant’,” Terry noted.

“The experience is what matters,” Daken replied.

“You have a very enlightened viewpoint,” Terry noted.

“I’m a biracial, queer mutant, who was ostracized by the ‘mutant community’ until a few months ago. Enlightened is a necessity. I have to rub the hypocrites’ noses in my damned enlightenment, to give meaning to any of it,” Daken sighed, a heavy, tired sound.
“... Do you want to sit down?” Terry asked. Daken let his knees buckle and slid down the door until he was on the floor. Well, that was definitely a response. Terry got out of his chair and walked over, sitting down cross-legged in front of him. “You came in here with a specific topic in mind, maybe you could walk me through that in more detail?”

Daken swallowed and nodded.

A clear Friday evening had more than half the staff lounging about the patio, eating or drinking beers and coolers and decompressing in each other’s company. Daken noted that Logan had brought Bellona out to the otherwise student-free zone and wrangled Monroe into some exchange possibly parodying a family dinner at one of the deck tables. He decided against interrupting or inserting himself into it and walked over to where Pryde and Reyes were sitting on the parapet, bottles in hand.

“I’m firing my therapist,” Daken announced, coming alongside Pryde and leaning his palms against the parapet.

He heard Pryde’s teeth grit for a second and smelled the irritation on her as she turned her head and gave him a look. “You have to go to the therapist, Daken. That was the deal,” she retorted.

Daken half-turned himself to where Dani, Rasputin and Ward were sitting on deck chairs giggling together about something. “Ward!” he called and the young man turned his head to look back. “Do you want an extra two hundred dollars a week?”

Ward gave him a confused look. “What?”

“Pryde says I have to patronize a therapist’s office,” Daken explained, loud and clear as the rest of the patio’s occupants quieted, glancing in Daken’s direction.

Pryde made a frustrated sound. “Daken, this has nothing to do with money. I am not concerned about supporting the therapy industry or whatever you’re trying to twist this into,” she snapped. “You have to go. to. therapy.”

“Actually, Kitty,” Ward said, walking over to them and dropping his voice as he came in closer. “Daken came to my office this afternoon. He believes he’d be more comfortable talking to a metahuman therapist. We did a double-session today.”

Pryde pursed her lips, giving him a concerned look for a moment. “And you’re comfortable with that?”

Ward nodded. “It’s not generally considered an ideal situation, because of loss of objectivity, but when I was with the Initiative, I was asked to provide support to my peers. It doesn’t bother me.”

Pryde sighed heavily, gazing at nothing for a moment, and then nodded. “Okay.”

“Excellent. Ward, do you prefer a check or direct deposit?” Daken asked.

“That’s- That’s not--” Ward stammered, looking embarrassed.

“Think about it and let me know,” Daken said, pushing away from the parapet.

He turned to his left and started walking, setting his eyes to where Drake was sitting sideways on a deck lounge. He’d been in conversation with Wagner, but now they were both watching Daken’s
approach. When Daken was two meters away, Wagner abruptly vanished; Daken’s feet faltered and he reigned in a cough as the sting of sulfur hit his senses. He shook his head and finished the journey, sitting himself down next to Drake on the lounge.

“... Hi,” Drake said softly. “... You seem a little more chipper than earlier.”

“You didn’t get angry,” Daken said, gazing at the faux brick.

“What?”

“About last night… I thought you’d be angry,” Daken elaborated.

“I- I don’t know what…” Drake floundered. “Are you upset? Did you want me to be mad?”

“... I thought you would,” Daken said again, shaking his head and wetting his lip.

“Daken, are you okay?” Drake asked very quietly.

“Never.” Daken closed his eyes and shook his head.

“... Can I help?” Drake asked.

Daken opened his eyes and stared unseeing at the deck. “Why do you want that?”

“Do I have to have a reason?”

“Yes.”

“Do I have to be able to articulate it?”

Daken sighed. “... You’re a mathematician. I suppose words won’t be your prowess.”

“Except for puns,” Drake said.

Daken smirked and tilted his head, looking sideways at him. “I was born in Japan, Drake, the country that elevated puns to one of its highest art forms. Do you really think you can impress me?”

“Wait… what?” Drake gave him a baffled look.

“Haiku,” Daken said.

“... Haikus are puns?”

“Oh yes, very much so,” Daken nodded.

“... Shit. I was born in the wrong country,” Drake said, shaking his head. Then he pursed his lips a moment and looked back at Daken, eyes serious again. “I’m not mad. I don’t have any right to be mad. I’m sorry for any times I’ve gotten mad when I didn’t have the-- What--?!” Drake’s image was swept through by a dissonance like bad reception on an old television, and a moment later he was gone.

Daken stared, breath caught for a few seconds, as he was only half aware of startled shouts from other occupants of the patio. A minute later, Bellona was suddenly down beside him, grabbing Daken’s arm and staring up at him. “W-what?” Daken whispered.
“... Father and Storm are gone,” Bellona said in a tiny voice, eyes asking him for something, some response to this.

And then Pryde’s voice was suddenly being put directly into his mind by one of the telepaths.

[Attention! This is a full lock-down! All students who have not received combat-approval report to the Danger Room immediately! Staff and volunteers who have received combat-approval, report to the main foyer unless otherwise directed!]

“What’s happening?” Daken demanded, climbing to his feet and looking around.

“I’ve never seen that teleport signature before,” Rasputin said. “But whoever it was just grabbed two of the world’s strongest omegas and the X-Men’s most infamous brawler. My gut says to expect the attack next.”

“Daken,” Pryde called, turning to him. “Take Bellona and go with Terry to the Danger Room. Jubilee’s meeting you there and she’ll take care of the head-count. I want you and the Cuckoos keeping the room calm.”

Daken nodded at her and turned, putting a hand on Bellona’s back and tugging her along with him toward the door. “Come on.”

“I can fight,” Bellona said softly.

“Which is why we will be on the last line of defense between the children and whatever’s coming,” Daken replied.

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“-- the fuck?!” Bobby demanded.

The landscape around him was Arizona-esque but the sky was a vivid purple, and instead of X-faculty, Bobby was surrounded by more than a dozen miscellaneous super heroes who looked just as startled as he felt. And right at the front, the unabridged Fantastic fucking Four. Because of course.

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“No, guys, stay in the middle here!” Jubilee demanded of the milling, wandering, excited and anxious teens while the handful of non-fighter upper school students tried to herd them. “If you haven’t checked in with me yet, do so! I need to know you’re all here so that we don’t waste time looking for you out there!”

“If you have already been counted, sit down until she is finished,” Daken’s voice cut through clear and strong with some perfect diaphragm control.

Jubilee looked up to find him, Bellona and Terry walking through the Danger Room’s doors. “Yeah, that’s a good idea,” Jubilee agreed with a nod, turning back to her tablet and scrolling to the Ks. “Bellona, I’ve got you,” she said.

“Daken!” Zach shouted, squirming his way through his classmates to run to meet him. “What’s happening?”

“Zach, sit down,” Jubilee called. She could have counted around him, but Zach tended to be an agent of chaos, so she’d rather have him on his butt.
“But--”

“It’s not a drill, Zach. Sit until she’s finished,” Daken said, patting his shoulder and stepping close to Jubilee. “Any missing so far?”

“No, I think the drills are paying off,” Jubilee replied, shaking her head.

“What kind of emergency is this, exactly?” Trevor asked, from where he’d settled down a yard from Jubilee’s feet with Shogo in his lap.

“We’re not sure yet,” Terry answered, circling around the cluster of students to help with the herding. “Professor Pryde felt it was best to be cautious.”

“What are we sure of?” Nathaniel pressed, clearly annoyed by the non-answer.

“Is there a security reason for need-to-know?” Daken asked quietly at Jubilee’s shoulder.

“I mean… I wasn’t there, what’s your take?” Jubilee glanced back at him and then to Terry who tilted his head slightly in consideration and then shrugged back at her. She kind of hated suddenly being the senior staff-member present.

“If there’s no logistical concerns--”

“-and you’re only worrying about causing a panic-”

“-uncertainty is more frightening than facts,” the Cuckoos announced.

Jubilee glanced at Daken again and found his eyes already waiting on her. She bit her lip and nodded.

“Three X-Men were forcibly teleported to an unknown location,” Daken called. “At this point, we do not know more than that, but have locked down the school on the chance that whoever is responsible for this was trying to thin out our defenses.”

A new anxious murmur started among the students and a girl piped up, “Who?”

“We will answer the questions we have answers for, after Professor Lee has finished the head-count,” Daken said in a voice made for shutting down arguments. “Give her your attention so she can get through this quickly.”

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This was a day that Bobby just plain should not have gotten out of bed. But seeing as he’d been abducted from home to some alien world in some other universe entirely, staying in bed probably wouldn’t have helped much. He just would have ended up right back here and wearing pajamas instead. Fighting eat-beast aliens whose entire faces were nothing but a terrifying mouth wasn’t the absolute last thing he wanted do, but he definitely had a sizable list of things he’d rather be doing. At the top of it, finishing whatever conversation he’d been about to have with Daken. Before, once again, Johnny and/or Johnny’s family jumped in the way.

The fight was going okay, there was enough power on their side that Bobby could spare the concentration for a moment to have an unsavory thought about said fire-starter. Did he have the right or reason for directing sour contempt at Johnny? Maybe, maybe not. Daken’s life was his own, and if he loved Johnny… Johnny had been there for him when the X-Men were ostracizing Daken. He’d looked past the bullshit and made a connection, where Bobby had pummeled first and
asked questions later. Maybe the most annoying thing about Johnny was that when Bobby thought about it, he had to admit that Johnny had just done better than him, and he’d earned Daken’s attention. Did that mean Bobby couldn’t be annoyed about it? Fuck. Rational or not, he was. And so what was normally considered by most objective standards to be a fairly pleasant voice, in that moment was the most annoying sound Bobby could imagine as it cut through the battle.

“Hey, troops! How’s it going? Sharon? Namorita?” Johnny called from somewhere to Bobby’s right.

Bobby gritted his teeth, trying to tune out the patter of responses bounced back and forth, and took out his frustration on the alien eat-beasts. A few minutes later, he felt the heat radiating off a fast-moving object a moment before bright orange flames caught his peripheral vision and he glanced over, just in time to see Johnny turning and noticing him back, dismay blooming on his luminous face.

“The hell are-- Who invited you?!” Johnny demanded.

“I’m going to assume your relatives did!” Bobby shot back. “What, you think I teleported myself across the cosmos?”

“We don’t need you!” Johnny shouted, glaring at him.

Bobby stared at him for two seconds, taken aback, before snapping, “Fine! Then send me the fuck home!”

“What the hell was that? Bobby gritted his teeth hard, then dropped a steep ramp and schussed down toward the battlefield. He decided that he wanted to take his fists to the eat-beasts, because distance-attacks just weren’t going to burn off the frustrated rage well enough.

Chapter End Notes

In the comics there was a giant 4 projected off the Earth's atmosphere before everybody was teleported, so people who were outside and looking at the sky would have known who theoretically had suddenly abducted a bunch of super heroes. I tossed around ideas and eventually decided that I preferred the idea of it just being completely blind. And when you're dealing with Reed Richards, failing to think about the social effect of his actions would not out of character.

Also in the canon story, Johnny was really bitchy at Bobby for these issues too, but with no real explanation given for why. Like, Bobby is pestering him very slightly, but Johnny's responses are completely disproportionate and incongruous with previous canon interactions. And that in and of itself is kind of normal, because everything about their canon interactions is sort of incongruous with canon itself...? Johnny and Bobby have very rarely shown up in the same comics (excluding massive group shots where it's dozens of super heroes to show how serious a situation is) and on those rare occasions where there have been X-Men/F4 crossovers, the dialogue and text boxes will reference there being some preexisting relationship, like "obviously you remember that Bobby and Johnny are friends, T.B., despite the fact that we've never
mentioned that before!" And I guess that's because there just weren't X-Men/F4 crossovers during the Silver Age, but then the Bronze Age writers and beyond all go "well obviously there should have been!" and try to retcon it in. So, in theory Johnny and Bobby have known each other since they were teens, and in theory they were friendly, that's the precedent that was sort of established in 80s era comics.  

But also, considering that we're post Secret Wars, and apart from characters who had been specific to Ultimate-verse getting merged into the 616, there were also some character-dynamics and personality-traits that got merged from Ultimate-verse versions of characters into their 616 counterparts (has anybody else noticed that the current Tony Stark is an amalgam of 616-Tony and Ultimate-Tony? those two had different personalities and different relationships with the people around them, and the new Tony is halfway between.) In Ultimate-verse, Johnny and Bobby were best friends, Kitty even referenced Johnny as being Bobby's big-brother figure. Johnny was briefly with the X-Men, before getting beaten nearly to death by an anti-mutant hate mob while trying to protect the smaller children, and then dropping out of continuity. So going forward, it's easy to argue that pieces of that relationship have been merged into the 616. But that doesn't really explain the bitchy-bickering in the recent F4 comics... I'm not sure where that's supposed to be coming from, because that hasn't really been referenced before. *shrug*
Daken was staying totally cool and in charge of everything, even when the kids all started freaking out worse after he told them who was missing. Professor Monroe was cool and nice, and most of them were dumb enough to like Professor Drake too, and some of the older kids were worried about Logan. So now they were all throwing a fit. But Daken stayed perfectly calm and shut down all of their dumb whining and arguing with no problems.

“But how can we just hide when we have to find them?!” Trina from the lower school demanded.

“There are more than a dozen X-Men and combat-trained upperclassmen on duty right now, as well as dozens more reserve X-Men Professor Pryde can call on,” Daken said in a cool and confident voice. “Having more players on the field is not going to improve the situation, it would just breed chaos.”

“Why aren’t you looking for them?” Cameron from 9-B asked. “If your dad’s gone, aren’t you the only tracker here?”

“Firstly, no, they have Macik. Secondly, I cannot track a teleport,” Daken retorted.

“How can you be so calm when your dad and your boyfriend are missing?!” Sharie from 11-A yelled.

“That stupid asshole isn’t Daken’s boyfriend!” Zach shouted in outrage, glaring at her.

“I don’t think that’s the most relevant argument at this moment, Zach,” Daken said. He must be more shaken up by Logan being abducted than he was letting on, because he didn’t seem to realize how important this was.

“Daken doesn’t give a damn about him!” Zach insisted, getting up in Sharie’s face.

“Sure, that’s why he jumps out of second-story windows to defend Professor Drake’s honor,” stupid jerk Deeds drawled all condescending.

Zach turned his glare on Deeds, then took three quick steps and gave him a hard shove, shouting, “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Zach,” Daken’s voice snapped from one direction as somebody grabbed his arm from the other.

“You need to knock it off and sit your ass down, brat!” Deeds’ stupid jerk boyfriend said, glaring down at him.

Zach glared right back, gritting his teeth. Stupid jerk Carver was some kind of psi-sensitive; he was begging for a migraine and Zach had one with his name on it. Zach cranked his powers to eleven and felt his lips spread into a grin as he watched Carver’s pupils dilate.

And then Carver was screaming. Really screaming. Zach’s breath caught and he stared in confused shock as Carver crumpled to the floor, shaking violently and continuing to scream. Zach’s brain couldn’t take in anything but the screaming until a hand clamped around his shoulder so hard it hurt, and he was yanked backward a step and around to meet Daken’s face. “Stop it!” he yelled,
startling Zach almost as much as the screaming.

“Y-Yeah,” Zach whispered, snapping out of it and rebalancing Carver’s powers as Daken moved past and dropped to his knees.

Carver’s screams turned to hysterical sobs. Deeds and Professor Lee were on the floor trying to calm him down even while they were freaking out themselves.

Daken grabbed one of his arms, pulling it up and demanding, “Are these leather?! What were you thinking?!”

“You’re yelling at him?!” Deeds shouted furiously. “Your asshole kid is the one--”

“I will deal with him later!” Daken snapped, yanking the still-sobbing Carver’s glove off. “What are his socks?!”

“What?” Deeds asked, giving him a look almost as baffled as it was angry.

“Are they wool?” Daken snapped, pulling the other glove off.

“No, cotton,” Professor Lee said, pulling the bottom of Caver’s pant leg up and pinching the fabric of his sock.

“Carver. Carver, look at me,” Daken demanded, leaning over him. “Are you wearing any other leather, wool or silk against your skin?”

“N-n-no,” Carver whimpered, shaking his head.

“Okay. Come here,” Daken said, his voice calm and cool again as he caught Carver under the arms, pulling him off the floor and against his chest. “Take deep breaths. Through your nose if you can,” he said.

“Wh-What the hell are you doing?” Deeds sputtered.

“My pheromone powers are stronger than yours. Do you want him calmed down and comfortable quickly, or is your sense of propriety more important?” Daken shot back.

Deeds shut his mouth and looked down at the floor. Professor Lee scooted next to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

Daken turned his attention back to the boy leaned against him. “Carver, assuming the lockdown is over by then, tomorrow I want you to send me a note in the dropbox or email. Tell me your glove size, how many pairs you need, and your color preferences,” he said in a calm, measured voice. “Then throw out everything you have that is derived from an animal. That includes wool, sheep get nicked with the shears sometimes. And silk is a slaughter just as much as leather.”

“You’re saying this was somehow Nathanial’s fault?” Deeds growled, glaring at him.

“I am saying that it would be in his best interest if he took measures to avoid it ever happening again,” Daken retorted.

“This only happened because that little monster--”

“Zach isn’t the only power-amplifier in the world,” Daken cut him off. “And if this happened during an assault--’’
“This was an assault!” Deeds yelled.

“Yes. It was. That’s not even debatable,” Daken agreed, and Zach felt sick. “But making the extremely minimal effort necessary to eliminate the possibility of this ever being used against him again does not require sacrificing the moral high-ground.” Daken glared at Deeds until he looked away and shut up, then looked down at Carver again. “If you ever wear wool socks, throw those out as well and put in the note your size and how many replacements you need. The vegan movement being what it is these days, synthetic options have become far more comfortable and fashionable than they once were.”

“... I have a few pairs of polyester gloves in my dorm,” Carver mumbled, pulling his sleeves farther down his arms and trying to hide his hands in the fabric of his shirt. “But, ’til the lockdown ends…”

“There should be latex or vinyl gloves in the first aid kit, right?” Daken asked, glancing at Professor Lee.

“Yes. Right. Good idea,” Professor Lee agreed, getting to her feet and hurrying to the various panels and things by the door.

“You’ve got control of your breathing now,” Daken noted and shifted Carver, giving him a nudge away from him. “Deeds, take over. Remember, if you want him to stay calm, keep yourself calm.”

“Right,” Deeds nodded, scooting over and wrapping around Carver as Daken stood up and turned around.

Zach bit his lip and tried not to take a step back, stomach sinking as he looked up at Daken and desperately searched for something to say. Daken closed the distance between them and put his hands on Zach’s shoulders. “Zach, you attacked a fellow student… I know the last few months have been confusing, and I gave you some very mixed messages when the deathseed was malignant…” Daken’s eyes shifted down to the floor and he pursed his lips for a moment before starting again. “You didn’t realize an amping was going to hurt him that badly.”

Zach shook his head and looked down.

“I know you weren’t trying to torture him, but you did make the decision to use your powers offensively against a peer,” Daken said calmly. “And doing so during an emergency situation makes it even more problematic. Besides hurting Carver, you caused more chaos when we are trying to keep you and your peers orderly and contained for safety reasons.” He sighed, sounding frustrated. “... I’m giving you two weeks detention. Report to the detention room after your last class of the day, until the dinner bell.”

Zach nodded, keeping his eyes trained on the floor.

“... You made a mistake,” Daken’s voice got softer. His right hand lifted off of Zach’s shoulder and cupped around the back of his head. “But you’re a good child,” he said, and kissed Zach’s forehead.

Zach blinked and his next breath shuddered on the way in and then came out as a sob. It felt like something crumbled inside his chest. When Daken’s hands withdrew, Zach threw himself into him, clinging and sobbing, “I’m sorry!”

Daken patted his back gently. “Apologize to Carver, please,” he said.

Zach hiccupped and pulled away, nodding. He kept his eyes on the floor while he walked a couple
of yards to where Carver and Deeds were sitting hugged up tight together on the floor. Zach knelt down, eyes still lowered. “... I’m sorry,” he whispered and swallowed hard. “... I don’t really understand what happened when I amped you, but I get that it sucked a lot, and I shouldn’t have done it, and it’s one hundred percent my bad, and I’m sorry.” He swallowed again, staring at the metallic floor under him.

There was silence for a little while, then Carver’s voice responded, “I acknowledge your apology.”

“Feel free to get the hell away from us now,” Deeds growled.

Zach nodded and climbed to his feet again, then turned and walked back. Daken’s hand landed on his shoulder and he leaned down close to Zach’s ear. “He has the right to stay angry,” he said quietly.

Zach nodded.

“But I appreciate that you apologized to him.”

Zach nodded again.

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“God, this is so awkward,” Bobby muttered. “And what even is his problem? He won so he has to rub it in? How is he always simultaneously an actually pretty good hero and an immature jerk?”

“Wonder if people ever ask that about you,” Logan sighed, rolling his eyes.

“He just swoops in out of the blue hours before Daken and I were supposed to get ambiguously-defined dinner, and now he’s acting like I’m the jerk?” Bobby demanded, probably mostly talking to himself at this point. The first half of the sentence was news to Logan, and he chewed on it for a minute while Bobby kept going. “What, he thinks he needs to tell me to back off? I’m not the one with a history of deciding to steal the Thing’s girlfriend or dating his ex’s sister.”

“Bobby.”

“I’m totally respectful of other people’s relationships!”

“Bobby,” Logan snapped, louder this time. Bobby glanced at him, guilt and embarrassment flashed across his face as he likely remembered that the axis around which his gossip-like complaints revolved was Logan’s son. “Is what Johnny's sayin’, or how he's actin’, not matchin’ up with somethin’ Daken told you?” he asked.

“I... don't know?” Bobby said doubtfully, looking away.

Logan sighed again and glanced to where the Fantastics were chattering with a swarm of teenagers and a few of the folks they’d brought in. “Bobby, sometimes Daken says things just to test you... He wants to see how you're goin' to react,” He looked down at the alien sand beneath them. “I've failed a lot of his tests. I didn't understand that he was tryin' to push me to act like a damn father, and... I made some real bad mistakes because of that.”

Bobby was quiet for a minute. “... I don't think he was lying,” he said. “He was gone until after two.”

“What did he tell you?”
“He said—” he hesitated, biting his lip a moment. “He talked about where they drove and then said he and Johnny got a hotel room.”

“Is that how he phrased it?” Logan asked, looking up at him.

“I think so?”

“So he was deliberately vague,” Logan noted.

Bobby frowned slightly, brow drawn in with confusion and consideration. “... Oh.”

Logan looked at the cluster around the Four again, clenching his teeth a moment and debating. “I ain't tellin' you this. Because I ain't no gossip, and I'm not about to betray my son's confidence,” he said in a serious voice and gave Bobby a stern glare when their eyes met. “He's scared of your temper, because he's scared of how bein' hurt makes him react... He needs to be away from violence and he knows it, I think he's maybe even accepted it now. It seems like maybe he's testin' how easy you get set off.”

Bobby was looking down, face painted with frustration and bottom lip between his teeth. “I've apologized and tried to fix it every way I can--”

“Bobby, it ain't about you bein' sorry,” Logan cut him off. “He's scared. And it's not really you he's scared of, it's the patterns he gets into.”

Bobby looked up again, brow drawn in, upset, even miserable. “... I can't fix it, can I?” he whispered.

Logan closed his eyes and mulled that over for a minute. “... You've taken a real shine to him, haven't you?”

“I-- It's just... At first I thought he didn't care about anything. That's what he tries to make people think, right? But it's fake. He's so passionate, and he doesn't hesitate for a second to call shenanigans on anybody, anytime. He just walks in the door and starts telling us everything we're doing wrong, and- and-- I snapped that first day because I thought he was a threat to kids, but he's not, we are,” Bobby said in a quick, nervous patter, uncomfortable, worried about Logan's reaction. “He makes me feel like an idiot because he calls me on my shit. He drives me crazy, because I'm constantly embarrassed, because he's constantly catching me out, not letting me get away with anything... And that embarrasses me more, because it forces me to realize how much I've always gotten away with, and just...”

“His mother was a spitfire,” Logan said quietly. “She was brought up polite, of course, but she could always find a perfectly polite way tell me I was a damn fool when I had it comin'.”

Bobby looked down again, a little smile on his lips for two seconds before it was swallowed by melancholy. “It kind of feels like he's giving me mixed signals, but if that's because I scare him... Dealing with me and all this as an open question is just doubling his anxiety load, isn't it?” he mused quietly. “I don't want that. I don't want to do that to him.”

“... Just make sure you weigh what you've got to offer against that before you close the book,” Logan said with a small shrug. “The fact he keeps focusing on you must mean he's seein' somethin' there.”

“... He was talking to me tonight, before we got pulled out,” Bobby muttered, and paused to chew on his lip a moment before continuing. “He was calm, and it felt like-- it felt like we were going to have a real conversation for once, and then suddenly I was here, fighting a damn space-god.” He
gave an annoyed huff. “I don’t feel like they really needed me to fight the space-god, and I don’t know why they grabbed me anyway. Lately Johnny’s made sure to point out that we’re not close. But here I am. For some reason.” He closed his eyes and scrubbed his hands through his hair. “And now that the fight’s over, it’s double the awkward and nothing to distract from it. I shouldn’t be here, I’m not a part of this- this extended-family thing. I’ve got no family here.”

“Y’don’t have to tell me,” Logan sighed and shook his head. “I get along with Grimm alright, but I didn’t think Sue thought too much of me after that business with Pym.” He tilted his head and glanced over his shoulder at the sound of running feet.

“So I guess they just asked themselves ‘who do we know who’s good in a fight?’” Bobby snorted and then gave a startled squeak as a pair of teenagers plowed into him, wrapping around Bobby in a double attack-hug.

“Mister Bobby came! So glad!” the green one exclaimed as ephemeral images flickered around them.

“Leach?! Artie! Oh my God! You guys are huge!” Bobby blurted and then laughed, hugging them back. “You’ve only been gone a year! How are you this big?”

“Eight! Eight years!” Leach corrected with a big grin. “Different time! In time-space and not time-space!”

Artie played a slideshow of images that only served to make the statement more confusing.

“There was an accident the day the world ended, and things went a little sideways for a while,” Sue Storm announced, walking up with a warm smile on her face. “We were lost from ourselves for most of that time, and we’ve been making our way through hundreds of universes in the past year and a half.”

“Sue,” Logan cast her a nod. “You’re lookin’ well.” Just like Leach and Artie, she looked the better part of a decade older, but no less a knockout.

“Thanks Logan,” she said, turning that smile that could melt butter on him. “And thanks for today. This.” She nodded back to where the fight had gone down. “We got into a bad situation.”

“You’ve kept these guys safe for eight years and before that,” Bobby said with a grin, an arm slung around the shoulders of each teenager. “The least we could do is our jobs, I guess.”

“I owe you, for all you and your family did for my son back then,” Logan said, shaking his head. “Back when I was too stupid to listen to what he was tryin’ to tell me.”

A worried frown flickered across Sue’s face and she tilted her head slightly. “Has something happened? Since we’ve been gone.”

“A lot. But Daken’s at the school now. Gettin’ counsellin’,” Logan nodded and then sighed, looking down. “Your kid brother comes around to talk to him… It’s a good reminder that he was always lookin’ for help. You saw that, and you gave it to him. I was too stubborn, only willin’ to help him my way, on my terms… Pushin’ him away.”

“Logan, don’t be so hard on yourself;” Sue said gently, laying a hand on his shoulder. “It was a difficult situation, and Daken was… scary.” Her smile came back a little bit, hesitant, her brow still slightly pinched. “I’m glad he’s doing better.”

“He’s not just doing better for himself, he’s really pulling his weight at the school now,” Bobby
interjected, and Logan felt the corner of his lips curl upward. “The kids respect him, and in a weird, confusing way, he’s really protective of them... Kitty’s just testing him out as a teacher this summer, but he’s probably one of the best-educated people we’ve got on staff. I’d be surprised if she doesn’t give him a more serious course-load in fall.”

Sue’s smile widened into a more genuine curve. “That’s wonderful,” she said and turned her eyes back to Logan. “I’m not going to lie, it was really nerve-wracking watching him grapple with morality while Johnny was so fascinated by him... And when he gave up on himself, that was painful.” She sighed and shook her head. “I’m glad he came around.”

“All Laura’s doin’.”

“She’s an amazing girl,” Sue said. “You must be very proud.”

“I’m proud of all of ‘em,” Logan nodded.

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Daken was anxious. Nobody was noticing because his facial expression was neutral and his voice was strong, but there were hints of fear on him. He was significantly more nervous than either of his colleagues. It was disturbing. Bellona studied him as she sat with her knees pulled up and her arms fencing them in. Professor Pryde’s direction to him on the balcony had implied that Daken was meant to be using his pheromone powers to keep order, but his scent kept fluctuating with brief spikes of anxiety, and so the students remained nervous despite the longer spans of gently calming pheromones.

Jubilee had made the Danger Room access Netflix to play a movie, and the distraction seemed to help, at least giving them something diverting to focus on. Zach had glued himself silently to Daken’s side for the last hour, and Daken had an arm around his shoulders, staring sightlessly at the movie screen while Bellona watched the reflected colors from the screen play across his skin.

Daken had assigned Zach a sentence of punishment for his earlier outburst, but neither of them seemed to be angry at the other, and both were taking comfort in the other’s proximity. It seemed odd. Bellona had always been comforted by Gabby’s presence, or that of their lost sisters, but the comfort came from solidarity, because they were being punished by the same people, other people. It’s true that detention was a very different kind of punishment, and much gentler than any Bellona had experienced in the labs, but the stated context had still been that it was punishment. How could Zach lavish adoration upon his punisher? Weren’t punishment and love mutually exclusive? And how could Daken punish him in the first place?

Bellona looked at the floor and chewed her lip. Daken’s relationship with Zach was different than his relationship with her. Or of Bellona’s with Gabby. He didn’t just love Zach, he was responsible for him. Responsible for his behavior and his safety. His behavior could endanger his safety, if he was to be expelled for it. Correcting the behavior improved Daken’s chances of keeping Zach safe. Laura had been able to keep Gabby safe because Gabby’s behavior had been much more acceptable than Bellona’s. She tilted her head and mulled that thought over for a minute, wondering whether Logan would punish her if she misbehaved. Bellona decided she didn’t want to test it.

She frowned, looking at the floor again, wondering if Logan wouldn’t have the opportunity to punish her either way. Would he come back alive? Was he already dead? She bit down on her lip harder and drew in her shoulders stiffly as she heard movement coming up behind her and a disconcertingly sweet scent closing in. She didn’t look, keeping her face turned forward and her gaze focused on the floor, as the counselor crouched down next to her. “Bellona, would you come talk with me, please?” he whispered.
Bellona tilted her head slightly in his direction but didn’t really turn for a moment, then she glanced at Daken. He’d turned to look back at her and they exchanged a glance, then he gave her a slight nod. Bellona climbed to her feet and followed as Mister Ward lead her toward the corner of the room.

“Danger Room, a small room here, please?” he called, glancing around with an air of discomfort as he addressed the bodiless AI. Walls sprang up, boxing in the corner of the room, and a door manifested in the side of one; Mister Ward held it open and waited for Bellona to walk through, then followed her in and shut it behind him. “Obviously this is an alarming situation, but it must be particularly hard on you because of your relationship with Logan,” he said, walking into the room and pausing. “Danger room, chairs, please?”

Two chairs appeared, facing each other, and Bellona stood indecisive a moment before walking over and sitting in one as Mister Ward sank into the other. “... I’ve only known Logan a few days,” she said quietly.

“Yes. I know,” Mister Ward nodded. “But he’s your father.”

“He’s Daken’s father too,” Bellona replied, looking at her knees.

“Yes,” Mister Ward agreed. “... Does it bother you that Daken and Zach are close?”

“... If Logan never comes back... Zach will have a father. And I won’t,” Bellona said in monotone, not so much calm as numb. “Even if Logan comes back, there are things I would rather talk to Daken about... But Zach needs and is entitled to all of his time.”

“The only person who’s entitled to all of Daken’s time is Daken,” Mister Ward countered. “And even if Zach does want to monopolize him, he doesn’t need Daken’s every waking moment. Quite frankly, that wouldn’t be healthy,” he said and leaned back in his chair. “No matter what the relationship is, nobody should be spending one hundred percent of their time with the same person day after day.”

Bellona pursed her lips and mulled that over for a moment. “... Daken’s already done more for me than he ever needed to,” she decided. “He made a commitment to Zach.”

“He did make a commitment, but being a parent isn’t an all-consuming identity exclusive of anything else,” Mister Ward said calmly. “I have every confidence that Logan will be back soon enough, but even when he is, you should ask Daken about spending some one-on-one time together. There’s nothing wrong with asking, and I think he’d like that.”

Bellona pursed her lips for a moment, studying the juncture of one wall with the floor. Finally, she nodded.

Chapter End Notes

There is something I seriously need to point out, and gripe about, with the art from this issue (#3) of Fantastic Four. Look at who Bobby is talking to in this panel:
Look at the shape of the head and features: the penciler was obviously drawing one of the moloid children. But then somebody put Vil or Wu's fishbowl helmet on them, for some reason?? And then the colorist apparently decided that obviously Bobby should be talking to Leach (and to be fair, he was right) so just colored this strange molantian child green, and then the scripter added appropriate speech affectations to back that decision up.

This is not an isolated mistake either! In the beginning of the following issue, there's an FF hug scene that has three Atlantian children (there are only supposed to be two) and Bentley is straight up missing. And I'm still mad that the FF isn't coming back. I don't care about the F4, I wanted all the delightful moppets back!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Daken glanced up when he heard the little sideroom Ward had conjured open again. He climbed to his feet as Zach made a disgruntled sound and looked up at him with a pinched brow. Daken touched a palm to the top of his head briefly in reassurance, and then made his way through the darkened, impromptu screening room, toward the door Bellona was walking out of. She glanced at him, expression nearly blank but with lips slightly curved downward. Daken paused next to her a moment, putting a hand on her shoulder and kissing her temple, then whispered, “I just need a quick word with Ward.”

Bellona nodded and walked past him, in the direction of where she’d been sitting before. Ward raised his eyebrow at Daken, who pointed toward the interior of the room. Ward walked back inside and watched him curiously as Daken stepped in and pulled the door shut.

“My child is antisocial. How do I fix it?” Daken asked.

Ward looked blankly back at him for a moment, and then sighed. “You’re just very determined to bring me all the hard, awkwardly blunt questions, aren’t you?”

“I’m sorry, is APD beyond the scope of your expertise?” Daken demanded.

“He doesn’t have antisocial personality disorder,” Ward said firmly, shaking his head. “He has social anxiety that he’s manifesting aggressively.”

“How do I fix it?” Daken pressed.

Ward pursed his lips for a moment, appearing to consider. “… Do you know how he interacted with his peers before he met you?” he asked.

“This is my fault?”

“That was a question, Daken. I don’t have enough background information, so I was asking a question,” Ward corrected.

Daken clenched his teeth for a few seconds and stated at the wall. “… He was avoiding his classmates outside of lessons, locking himself in his dorm room to play video games, and only conversing with a stranger on the internet who showed entirely too much interest in the thoughts of a lonely teenager,” he listed, crossing his arms. “Honestly, if I hadn’t reeled Zach in, I have no doubt some ephebophile would have.”

“And since you’ve been here at the school, he’s continuing to freeze out his peers?” Ward asked.

“Yes.”

Ward nodded slowly. “I think he’s using you as a crutch. He’s decided he doesn’t need friends, because he has you,” he said.

“How do I fix it?” Daken asked again.

“Encourage him to engage with his peer group more outside of classes,” Ward suggested.
“Sometimes it would be fine to have you there as a security-blanket, ask some of the kids from his classes to join you and him in low-key activities, but also make sure there’s times when you’re not there. Something structured, like one of the school clubs, will be less intimidating to start him out.”

Daken nodded slowly, biting his lip. “... He’s not going to like that,” he noted quietly.

“Tell him candidly why. This isn’t something you need to trick him into,” Ward said with an open shrug. “Just lay it out on the table. Explain to him that you want him to engage more with his classmates because you’re worried. Tell him that this is what’s healthier for both of you, and so you need him to try.”

Daken stared at nothing for a minute. “... For both of us,” he repeated quietly.

“It’s unhealthy for micro groups to be too insular,” Ward explained. “There are anxiety disorders that can develop specifically between pairs or trios of people, co-paranoia and co-psychosis. Especially, not to be rude, but especially where there are preexisting psychological factors at play for one or more parties.” He folded his hands in front of him and shifted awkwardly. “I realize that it was definitely Zach’s behavior which caused problems today, but you already know and acknowledge that you have difficulty with your mental hygiene. I’m concerned that having a relationship which skirts the border between ‘close’ and ‘conspiratorial’ too intensely could become hazardous to both of you, if you don’t make a regular effort to include other people in your world.”

Daken continued to stare at nothing for a few minutes, before finally turning his eyes back to Ward and whispering, “Okay.”

“From what I’ve observed, you seem like a good father, Daken,” Ward said softly. “Zach’s experiencing some anxiety issues that revolve around you right now, but that’s not something you caused so much as the situation he came from before. You don’t have to push him away hard, just encourage him to connect with kids his own age.” He tilted his head and the corner of his mouth scrunched as he bit the inside of his cheek, eyes distant as he appeared to think. “Maybe structure things, schedule set days when he’s not to seek you out unless it’s a crisis, and set days when he has to do a recreational activity with other kids.”

“Okay,” Daken nodded again.

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After an hour of watching the Future Foundation kids tinker with the big piece of alien technology, it was finally announced that the machine for teleporting people across space and universes had been fully repaired. Despite mounting annoyance and stress every additional minute they were on an unknown planet in an unknown universe, and feeling antsy that things were taking so long, Bobby had to admit it was actually damn impressive that a handful of teenagers managed to rebuild a scrapped trans-dimensional alien thingummy in an hour. Doctor Richards had given no direction, only assisting when questioned as the little geniuses and super-geniuses chattered with each other, asked Sue and Ben to lift things, and used Johnny as a spot-welder.

The fluid coordination of it again had Bobby missing the dynamics of a tiny student body, but he knew it was impractical. These days the school’s primary function was to keep mutant kids from getting killed; the school had expanded because it had to. Now Bobby was the one who needed to figure out how to be his best-self in a bigger pond. When the kids had finished their work, Doctor Richards turned and started addressing the assembled rental-heroes waiting on them.

“To be safe, let’s not tax the power-supply. We’ll send you home in waves,” he called, drawing a
large circle in the sand near the machine. “Ororo, Bobby, Logan, Sharon, Luke, Namorita, thanks for your help,” he said, giving them a wave over to the impromptu launchpad.

Bobby hopped off of the rocks he’d been sitting on and made his way to the circle, then paused as a hand landed on his shoulder.

“Hang on just a sec, Reed,” Johnny called, and turned to Bobby. “Sorry about snapping earlier, adrenaline and all that,” he said, an easy, slightly smirky smile on his face as he pulled Bobby into a hug.

“... Sure. No problem,” Bobby mumbled, startled and baffled.

Johnny leaned his mouth close to Bobby’s ear. “I swear to God, if you ever make him bleed again, I will kill you,” he whispered. “That’s not hyperbole, and it’s not an idle threat. ‘Omega’ doesn’t scare me. I spent two off-the-record years in the Negative Zone getting really good at killing guys bigger, stronger and meaner than me.” Johnny paused for a couple seconds, letting that sink in and turn Bobby’s stomach slightly. “Everybody’s got a weakness to be exploited. And yours is extreme heat, isn’t it?” he said with a faint lilt, and then let Bobby go and stepped back, expression perfectly blithe again. “Thanks for coming, buddy!”

Bobby stared at him for a couple seconds and then nodded silently and made his way into the circle with the rest of his departure group. His mind drifted back to that afternoon in Daken’s dorm, Daken laying on the floor and telling him that Johnny’s boy-nextdoor act was all facade. Maybe Bobby should feel privileged to have witnessed its momentary suspension; mostly he just felt sick and disconcerted. Both by that peak at something vicious behind the magazine-cover that was Johnny’s face, and by the fact that Johnny had apparently felt that threat needed to be made.

He was still mulling that thought over as the Arizona-like landscape around him disappeared and the staff patio of the school manifested under his feet again. He glanced around; Powerman, She-Thing and Namorita were gone now, and Logan and Storm seemed to be running down the same mental-checklist as Bobby. He drew a breath and opened his mouth, about to speak, but was cut-off by a loud psicast.

[Where the hell have you lot been?!] Betsy demanded.

“Fightin’ alien gods with the Fantastic Four,” Logan drawled and wandered over to the door then paused and considered the titanium panel that had covered it and the windows on either side. “See you went into full lockdown.”

A second later, Kitty came running through it. “Where the hell have you all been?!” she demanded.

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The lockdown had been canceled, with a psicast announcing that it had been a false alarm and the abducted X-Men were home again. So a lot of bullshit for nothing. Not for nothing. The incident in the Danger Room had made Daken realize that he couldn’t keep ignoring Zach’s aggressive dislike of other teenagers; it had to be addressed and corrected for. Trusting that Logan would find him when he was finished with whatever security-briefing questions Pryde might need answered (or not, maybe it wouldn’t occur to him as a considerate thing to do) Daken made ripping the bandaid off of this uncomfortable but necessary conversation his priority and ushered Zach to his suite.

“I’m in trouble, huh?” Zach asked in a quiet, miserable voice as he walked into the front room.
“I already gave you detention,” Daken said, frowning slightly, pulling the door shut behind him.

“You gave me detention as a teacher. Are you going to give me a dad-punishment too?” Zach wondered, looking over his shoulder at Daken, brow pinched.

Daken sighed and knelt down on the floor, settling into a relaxed seiza and chewing on his lip for a moment as Zach sat down facing him, radiating nervous doubt. “... You may see it that way,” he said softly. “... Zach, you know there’s something wrong with the way you interact with the other students, right?”

Zach looked down at the floor and shrugged.

“I want to be a good parent, Zach. I want to give you the guidance you need,” Daken said, schooling himself to stay calm. “And that’s difficult for me sometimes, because I didn’t have a normal childhood and I don’t really know what one looks like… I can often tell when there’s something wrong, but I don’t always know how to correct it.”

“You are a good dad,” Zach said, looking up at him. “I was bad. I messed up. That’s not on you.”

“You’re not bad, Zach,” Daken said firmly. “But, it seems like… you’re not comfortable around other teenagers.”

“... I guess,” Zach whispered, shrugging.

“I asked Mister Ward for advice. Not to embarrass you, but because I didn’t know what I should be doing to help you,” Daken told him levelly. “And even though it’s going to be difficult and uncomfortable at first, he said it’s very important that you spend more time with your peers.”

Zach bit his lip and his brow furrowed deeply.

“I’m worried about you, and Mister Ward is worried about both of us and the effects that being too insular can have upon people,” Daken paused for a second, biting his lip and then clarified, “The kind of combined psychological/sociological disorders that develop when we build a fence to separate a very very small ‘us’ group from the rest of the world as ‘them’.”

“No. Mister Ward doesn’t get it,” Zach said, shaking his head forcefully. “He’s only been here, like, five minutes. He’s got it wrong.”

“Zach… I was raised-- I was conditioned to never trust anybody except Romulus. Aside from the fact that he was the absolute last person I should have trusted, that… that isolation has left a lot of lingering psychological scars,” Daken said quietly, looking down at the rug. “That is the very last thing I want to do to you, but it seems like you’re doing it to yourself. I can’t let you. I need to stop that from happening… Mister Ward suggested beginning by setting up a sort of schedule.”

“Like- Like what? What do you want me to do?” Zach asked, his voice and expression pinched.

“... Start simple… There’s movie night. One of the staff takes a group of students to McDonalds and a movie every Friday. I’d like you to start going with that group,” Daken said. “And maybe tomorrow, after we’ve both gotten some rest, we could talk about other extracurricular activities, and see if we can pick out a few that sound engaging.”

Zach bit his lip again and nodded, keeping his eyes on the floor.

“... I think this is what I’m supposed to do, to be a responsible parent,” Daken said softly, and then swallowed. “And I think it’s what you need to try and do, to grow as a person.”
Zach nodded again.

There was a knock on the door, Logan checking in, and Daken called to the security interface after the first rap, “Open.” He kept his attention on Zach though, Logan could wait his turn, and reached out, taking both of Zach’s hands in both of his. “It’s not about punishing you, you know that right? You need to try and have…” he trailed off and stared straight ahead, eyes losing focus, as the scent of the person who had just walked into the room rolled over him, and it wasn’t Logan’s. After two seconds he turned sharply, staring at the intruder he’d accidentally invited inside.

“I… The door opened,” Drake said in a quiet, nervous voice, looking and smelling deeply uncomfortable.

“… I thought Logan…?” Daken mumbled.

“He’s- He’s checking on Bellona,” Drake said, thumb-gesturing vaguely.

“Right. Of course,” Daken nodded numbly.

“I guess things got pretty tense here. The lockdown and all,” Drake said awkwardly, not making eye-contact.

“Yes, one gets a bit touchy when half of their defensive firepower suddenly disappears without warning or explanation,” Daken retorted.

“Y-yeah,” Drake agreed with a wince. “I… heard you were on the chaperone team…”

“GET OUT!” Zach suddenly screamed, making them both jump and turn to look at him. He was flushed with fury and glaring daggers at Drake. “GET OUT! Nobody invited you! Nobody wants you here! GO AWAY!”

“Zach, stop it.”

“GO AWAY!” Zach screamed again. “You’re not welcome here!”

“Zach, this is my room, not yours,” Daken snapped.

Zach turned his eyes to Daken for a second, and looked like he might burst into angry tears. Instead, he shoved himself to his feet and stormed toward the exit. Drake stepped quickly sideways to get out of his path, as Zach wrenched the door open and stomped into the hall.

“Zach, wait,” Daken called, chasing after him. “Zach, you don’t--”

Zach whipped around and threw himself into Daken, wrapping his arms around him and letting out a ragged sob. “He’s horrible and mean and he’s going to hurt you again!” he wailed into Daken’s shoulder.

“Shhhh shhhh. It’s okay, Zach,” Daken murmured, holding him snuggly, and kissed the crown of his head.

“It’s not okay! Don’t say it’s okay!” Zach whined. “He hurt you and it’s not okay!”

“No, you’re right, you’re right, it’s not. But I’m safe now. We’re safe now,” Daken assured him, stroking his back.

“I- I should go…” Drake said weakly from behind him, and Daken could hear his footsteps retreating up the hall.
Daken sighed and leaned his cheek against Zach’s head, feeling too tired to be annoyed by all of it. “... He’s not going to hurt me, Zach,” he said softly.

“He already did!” Zach protested.

“I know, but it’s different now,” Daken said. “The situation is different now.”

“He’s horrible. He’s horrible, and I hate him,” Zach growled. “I won’t let anybody do that to you. Not ever again.”

“... I’m supposed to protect you,” Daken whispered.

“You can’t if overpowered assholes like him keep trying to kill you,” Zach retorted.

Daken kissed his hair again.

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Bobby stared at the moon as he tilted his head back and swallowed another mouthful of beer. It was three-quarters and looked extra bright, because the light-pollution from the city drown out any star that might have tried to compete with it. It glared accusingly back down at him. Accusing him of what he had done and what he might do. Because that was the sport of the day. Zach was absolutely convinced Bobby was going to attack Daken again, like he had that first, stupid, horrible night. And Johnny thought it was a real enough possibility to threaten him.

Were they right? Logan had brought up Bobby’s temper. Did he have a temper? Well, shit, yes. Logan had seen Bobby’s temper at its grandest, hadn’t he? The deathseed didn’t create the anger, it just magnified it beyond what Bobby could bottle up. That ugliness came from inside of him. Bobby’s worst-self manifested as a world-destroyer. Under the same influence (no, worse, the deathseed Bobby had been implanted with was incomplete, just a piece of one) all Daken’s worst-self had done was unlawfully adopt a teenager and seek non-lethal revenge against somebody who had brutalized him. Bobby’s worst-self was so much worse than Daken’s worst-self, wasn’t it?

He finished his beer, crushed the can between his half-frosted palms, and opened another. The moon judged him for it; it was his fifth. It wasn’t like he’d downed them all at once, though. When he’d started, the moon had been at the treeline, now it was pretty high up there. He tilted the can back and took three deep swallows, then hunched forward, bracing his arms against his knees, and glared at the park lights. Bobby’s worst-self had hurt strangers, but they were incidental. He’d targeted the people he supposedly loved and hurt them. That’s who he was. That was the monster under his skin. Abuser. Abuse is sewage, it rolls downhill and just gets worse as it goes. So Dad had demeaned him and given Bobby a swat when he talked back? So Bobby would hospitalize his ‘loved ones’ when he was having a bad day. There were so many excuses. He could make so many excuses. Excuses had all the value of Monopoly money.

Bobby threw his head back and gulped down the rest of the fifth beer without taking a breath. He crushed it, pulled the plastic ring off of the last one, and popped the tab. The moon side-eyed him. This was stupid. This was what he wanted because he was stupid. Throwing out control. Letting the deathseed be his excuse for being a shitty person. Letting the alcohol take him now, because he was so irresponsible he didn’t even care if he let himself go. Let himself slip into an uncertain world where maybe his worst-self would show through the cracks. But he had to stay in flesh-form to hold the buzz, so at least he wouldn’t be slipping into dark-god mode. He’d probably just pass out and do nothing. Nothing but be completely pathetic. He tipped up the can and started drinking his last beer. There was more, down in the staff fridge, but he wasn’t that stupid. Probably. He probably wasn’t stupid enough to try for a stomach-pumping.
The moon was beautiful, glaring back at him with a frigid disdain that said ‘you know what you did.’ Its perfect regality mirrored Daken so well. But not quite, not when it was at three-quarters. If it was full or a sliver, when it was in its best elegance like that, then it might be as pretty as Daken. No, not really. But at least it might match his coolly detached contempt for weak excuses. Bobby looked back down at the park. The warm yellow of the park lights was less intimidating. He sipped slowly for a few minutes, eyes unfocused, letting the park lights blur before him. That Johnny had seen fit to threaten him, the wording of the threat, had seemed to imply both that what Daken had implied that afternoon was, like Logan guessed, just a test, but also that Johnny seemed to think Bobby had an actual shot.

But should he take it? Should he risk it? Could he keep his worst-self away from it?

He lowered his beer, bit his lip and closed his eyes, curling in on himself and leaning his forehead against his knees. He let out a quiet, miserable whine that would have embarrassed him if anyone were around to hear it. He was a drunk mess. But he was also a mess in general. He shouldn’t be asking himself any of this. He shouldn’t be considering Daken. He wasn’t good enough. He didn’t deserve anyone that beautiful and smart. And he’d mess it up. He’d mess it up epically. There would be ballads about badly he’d messed it up. Then Johnny would probably kill him. And Bobby wouldn’t even care, because death would come as a blessed relief after how badly he’d have messed up. That was the future if he let himself chase the fantasy that he could have Daken. He didn’t deserve Daken.

Bobby lifted his head and tried for another gulp of beer. He choked, coughed a couple times, and tried again. He was too drunk for drinking, apparently. And too stupid to acknowledge it. He should probably acknowledge it. He bit his lip and stared at the can for a minute, then turned it upside down and let the remaining contents fall down onto the shingles. He gathered up the other five cans and balled them together with some ice. Bobby squinted at the edge of the roof for a minute, then pressed his hand down next to him and conjured a slide. He didn’t shift form apart from his hands, because it’d be a shame to lose a couple hours worth of hard-earned drunkenness, as he slid down, frost soaking into his jeans, and curved the slide around at the edge of the roof to bring him back to his window. He tumbled on the way through and ended up on the floor and coughing.

Clumsy, stupid, drunk. Bobby stared blankly at the carpet and furniture-legs for a minute before picking himself up. He left the cans on the floor where they’d rolled, and stumbled across the bedroom and out through his sitting room. He reached for his main door, and obviously that was stupid and he shouldn’t be wandering around the halls because somebody was going to catch him and give him an ‘I’m worried about your life-choices’ look. That logic didn’t penetrate, and inertia propelled him out into the hallway. He turned right and started wandering, stumbling along, feeling dazed and disconnected from what his feet were doing. Then they stopped, turned him, and his hand was slapping against the door in front of him while his mind reeled, trying to catch up with what was happening.

“Dakeeeeen!” Bobby wailed at the door, slapping it again. “Daaakeeeeeeeneen!” He pressed his forehead against the door and bit his lip, screwing his eyes shut. He should definitely not be doing this. He was too drunk to be doing this. He shouldn’t have been doing this if he was sober. But apparently he was too drunk to make himself go back to his room. “Daaakkeeεεεεεεεeeeneen...” he whined out in a pathetic little mewl.

The door opened and Bobby stumbled forward, flailing to catch his balance. Arms caught him. Muscley, toned arms with buttery-smooth, perfectly tanned skin. “... How much did you drink?” Daken asked. Quietly judging him. Like the moon.
“Six pack… No. No. I threw out half’f the sixz one. B’cause I was too drunk. I threw ’t out t’be responsible,” Bobby answered, gripping handfuls of Daken’s tshirt as Daken put him upright again.

“Yes, very responsible,” Daken sighed, rolling his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Bobby whined at him. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry.”

“What you do for fun really isn’t any of my--”

“I hurt you. Zach’s right. I hurt you. I’m shitty. I’m such a shitty person,” Bobby babbled and Daken went quiet, staring at him. “And- And I should be sorry just b’cause it was shitty, but I don’t know, would I be sorry ’f it was somebody else? ’f it was somebody ugly and stupid, would I even care? ’m I only sorry b’cause you’re so God damned amazing?”

“... You need to go back to your room and sleep this off,” Daken said quietly. It wasn’t a particularly helpful answer.

“... C’n I come in?”

“No. You may not,” Daken said firmly.

“I jus’-- I jus’ want--”

“I know what you want. What you need is to go back to your room and sleep this off,” Daken said.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” Bobby whined at him. “You’re so amazing, and I got mad b’cause I thought you were making fun o’ me, b’cause you’re too beautiful and amazing and smart, and it didn’ make sense for you t’be picking me up, and I thought you were jus’ hitting on me to make me feel more pathetic, b’cause it’s like-- it’s like, I thought you were rubbing it in that you’re so far outta my league, and I got mad, and I froze you b’cause I forgot’at ‘unkillable’ isn’ the same as ‘invulnerable’, and it was stupid and cruel, and I know better, I know better, and I want t’be a better person, but I don’ know if I can, because I just keep fucking up ever’ time I talk to you, and I just keep being shitty to you because- because I’m just a shitty person, aren’t I?”

Daken caught the back of his neck and took a step in close, close enough Bobby thought he could feel Daken’s body-heat next to his chest. His cheek touched Bobby’s as Daken’s mouth hovered close to his ear. “You’re a fuck-up, but you’re not a shitty person,” he whispered. “... And I’ve fucked up more in my life up to than you ever will.” He withdrew a few inches and then pressed a kiss against Bobby’s cheek before stepping back. “Now go back to your room and sleep this off.”

“... I can’t come in?” Bobby asked again.

“No,” Daken said, giving him a gentle push backward. “Go back to your own room.” He looked at Bobby for a few more seconds before quietly closing the door.

Chapter End Notes

The thing Johnny said about killing people for two solid years, yeah, that’s totally canon. Admittedly, the people he killed probably came back to life afterwards, just like he did the hundreds of times he got violently killed. Prisoner-gladiator battles with resurrection: it’s torture and entertainment all in one! Annihilus is so efficient. After escaping, he promptly turned around and killed a few thousand Arthrosians and
laughed about it. And nobody seemed concerned by that... Writers tend to do really fucked up things to Johnny, and then never mention it again and write him back to smiles. I really want a Marvel writer to lampshade that and the fact that it really should by all logic be understood as an act. Johnny has had a fucked up life and family situation since... before he was ten, I think?

Emerald City is happening this weekend and it's awesome. What's less awesome is my cosplay broke three days before. Mad about it.
Mornings are Awkward

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bobby woke up sincerely wishing he hadn’t. He was really dehydrated; he could feel the dehydration through his powers as much as the headache. He knew how to fix it, but the pain and nausea made it hard to concentrate. He rolled onto his side and curled himself into a ball, desperately trying to focus on pulling the ambient humidity toward him. Falty, stuttering like a reluctant engine, he finally managed to shift form, and he kept condensing moisture onto himself as the hangover faded bit by bit and his head started to clear.

Then the memories of the previous night started coming back, and Bobby wished he was still too stupid to remember how stupid he was. It was like he was running down a checklist of how many ways he could possibly make a fool of himself for Daken. He must be close to the bottom of the list now, right? There couldn’t be many boxes left to tick, right? Wishful thinking. Bobby whimpered pathetically, despite being almost back up to his normal water-mass and the hangover nearly resolved.

Debate raged as he really wanted a shower but he also really didn’t want to shift back out of ice form and give up the relief of half-numbed emotions. He kept holding form much longer than necessary to banish a hangover, staring at the sheets and wondering if Daken was more annoyed or more disgusted with him right now. Finally, he tried to sit up, but he’d gotten himself stuck to the sheets by frost, and had to shift form to untangle himself. Embarrassment, shame, self-disgust, despair became so much sharper as he resumed his humanity, and a surge of nausea hit Bobby despite having already fixed the hangover.

As he stumbled toward his bathroom, Bobby debated whether he should go find Daken and try to apologize. After he’d washed the stink of shame off of himself, of course. He wasn’t sure he could face that. Would Daken drop a few scathing admonishments, or would he just feel infectious embarrassment and ask Bobby to leave him alone again? Like last night. Because Bobby had embarrassed himself so badly the embarrassment was pandemic.

Stripping out of his pajama pants and leaning heavily against the tile wall as he fussed with the shower knobs, Bobby decided that he really needed a little more context before he could swallow his mortification and face Daken. And he’d just have to swallow some pride and irritation and a whole lot of awkward to get that context, but right now anything was less daunting than the prospect of Daken’s potential withering disdain.

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Daken was drifting in the fog when somebody called his name. He was warm and nothing else, and didn’t want to come out. He wanted to be warm and nothing else. His name came again, tearing at him with teeth and claws and ripping him from the fog as a gentle hand touched his arm. He was still warm under his duvet, but now he was other feelings too. His stomach clenched, and he bit his lip and held his breath as Rachel’s voice called his name again.

“... No,” Daken mumbled, not moving, keeping his eyes closed.

“It’s eleven, Daken,” Rachel said softly.

Daken swallowed, and his mind reassembled the world and its relevant details. “... Saturday,” he
protested quietly.

“Yeah, you’re not missing any classes,” Rachel agreed, getting into the bed and curling herself against his back. “But you don’t usually sleep in this late… You okay?”

“... Tired,” Daken whispered.

“Did Logan check in with you last night?” Rachel murmured, near his shoulder-blade.

“... Yes,” Daken agreed.

“You heard what happened? Where they went?” she asked.

“... Yes.”

“Is that okay? Is it stressful that the Fantastic Four are back?” Rachel kept pestering.

“... Fine… It’s good,” Daken answered.

Rachel was quiet for a moment, Daken could hear her chewing on her lip. “... It feels like you mean that, but I’m curious, because your reasons for feeling things are often different than the general public’s,” she mused in a slow, careful murmur. “Can you tell me why it’s good? For you?”

Daken considered her ‘curiosity’ for a minute or so. The return of the Fantastics was objectively good, advantageous to the Earth as a whole; Daken was practical enough to recognize that. But it did affect him too. “... Johnny doesn’t need me now,” Daken said.

There was another pause. “And you don’t want him to need you?” Rachel asked.

“... It’s too confusing,” Daken sighed. “Too many levels… If Susan’s back to look after him, the pressure’s gone.”

Rachel nodded, cheek brushing against Daken’s back. “... Is something else bothering you? I heard that there was a problem with Zach during the lockdown.”

“... Ward said he needs to go to clubs… He doesn’t like it, but he agreed,” Daken said, finally, slowly, blinking his eyes open and gazing unfocused out at the edge of the duvet and the room beyond his coucoon.

“It’s good that you’ve got a strategy and he’s onboard,” Rachel noted. “Is that--”

“Drake,” Daken interrupted, the oppressive weight of today’s melancholia finally resolving to a recognizable shape.

Rachel was quiet for a few seconds, she shifted gears to follow the new subject. “You were talking to him last night, right? Before he disappeared?” she asked softly. “Did he talk to you after he came back?”

“He tried… Zach chased him away,” Daken sighed, and then drew his bottom lip in a bit and licked it. His mouth felt dry and sticky.

“... Sounds stressful,” Rachel said, and Daken could feel her trying to find his hand; he didn’t bother to help, and it took her a minute to get her thin fingers fitted around his slack palm. “It seems like you want to talk to Bobby,” she said slowly, stroking the pad of her thumb against his skin. “Do you just want to talk about what happened last fall?”
She knew that wasn’t it. Challenging him to correct her instead of just asking an open-ended question for him to dismiss. She knew him well enough to make a play at subtle manipulation now. But he knew himself just well enough not to get caught. “He came back a few hours later. Drunk,” he said.

Rachel went quiet for a few seconds again, and Daken could smell her concern. “What happened?”

“He apologized and self-deprecated,” Daken replied, shrugging his shoulder slightly. “Kept asking to come in.”

“... Did you let him in?”

“He was drunk,” Daken growled, annoyed.

“Sorry. Of course you didn’t,” Rachel murmured.

“... It’s just been confusing… The last two days,” Daken sighed and bit his lip a moment. “... Too much coming all at once…”

“I know. It’s reasonable to be overwhelmed,” Rachel said and let go of his hand to wrap her arm snugly around his chest in a lopsided, horizontal hug. “Do you want to walk me through it?”

“... No,” Daken shook his head slightly, closing his eyes. “I don’t want to think about this anymore. Johnny is… I don’t know. He always makes me feel good and terrible at the same time… I need a break.”

“If he causes you that much stress, then stepping back sounds like a good decision,” Rachel said.

“It ends up being good timing after all, I suppose. He has his family back now so…” Daken trailed off as a thought rose out of the murk, and his eyes snapped open; suddenly he was fully awake. He shifted and sat up, staring ahead at nothing.

“Daken?”

“Reed Richards is back,” Daken said.

“Yes?” There was a tone in Rachel’s voice equal parts confused and concerned.

“The man who built prototypes of the next-gen skrull detectors our planetary defenses still use from cobbled together scrap.” Daken swung his legs off the bed and climbed to his feet, heading quickly for his bathroom.

“Daken, what’s going on?” Rachel called after him.

“Taking a shower. It’s after eleven,” Daken shot back. “Need to get myself presentable if I’m going to visit the Wizard of Oz.”

“... Okay.” He heard Rachel getting off the bed, and coming to stand in the door jam of the bathroom as he stepped into the shower and turned it on. “Why do you want to see Doctor Richards, Daken?” she asked.

He stood motionless and stared at the tile of the shower wall for a minute. As much as Rachel had become a reassuring presence in his new life, she was ultimately devoted to Pryde more than anyone or anything else, and any action that might earn the Pryde-frown-of-disapproval couldn’t be confided to Rachel. “Brain, heart, courage, that sort of thing,” he finally replied.
“Daken…” Rachel started, and then sighed. “…Okay. Let me know if you want to talk.”

“Thank you,” Daken said. “Maybe later.”

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Bobby pulled out his phone as he waited for the Keurig to pour his coffee. He flipped through his contacts and pressed the call button, bringing it to his ear.

“What’s cookin’, Sug?” Rogue’s voice asked after two rings.

“Coffee. Or brewing anyway,” Bobby answered. “Hey, did Johnny give you a forwarding address or something? I know the Baxter Building is yuppy apartments these days, so do you know where the blue crew landed?”

There was a pause on the other end for a few seconds before Rogue answered, “…Johnny’s here.”

“Oh, they’re staying at the mansion?” Bobby asked, and then felt dumb because it made perfect sense. It had been Johnny’s money (or maybe Reed Richards’ money) that rebuilt Avengers Mansion, so the least the Avengers could do is put them up.

“Not ‘they’. Just Johnny,” Rogue corrected, and there was definitely an uncomfortable tone in her voice.

“…Why?” Bobby asked, frowning.

“That really ain’t my business to say, Bobby,” Rogue replied.

“Right. Okay,” Bobby bit his lip for a moment, uncomfortable.

“You need to talk to him?”

“I-- Actually, is it alright if I come over there?” Bobby asked.

“A’course it’s alright if you come. Ah can’t promise what kinda mood Johnny’s gonna be in, but Ah don’t mind you comin’ over to try at it,” Rogue said.

“Okay. Thanks. I’ll head over in a bit and… see what happens,” Bobby said, nodding to the empty room and feeling a couple notches more uneasy at the necessary conversation than before.

“Alright. Ah’ll see ya soon.”

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The remains of the Baxter Building had been torn down shortly after the fall of Parker Industries, and it would probably take the rest of the world a few Fantastical sightings to pin down where the new Fantastic headquarters was. But Daken wasn’t the rest of the world; he knew that Benjamin Grimm had purchased an entire apartment building the previous year and hadn’t been renting the units. Perhaps some part of him had held onto hope, or perhaps he’d simply wanted to mourn in as much quiet as he could be afforded within city limits. Either way, it was the first address on Daken’s mental list, and when he reached the steps, the scents painting them served as gratifying confirmation.

It lacked the automated security scanners and accouterments of the Baxter Building (Daken gave it a week at most before that ceased to be the case) and so he gave the very ordinary door a firm knock and waited. After a minute, the door was opened by a woman with terracotta-colored hair
and a matching smell of damp clay clinging to her. She tilted her head, and Daken could tell that she was gauging him by her ears, trying to search for anything she recognized.

“Hello?”

“You must be Miss Masters,” Daken said, holding out a hand, palm upward, and letting his arm brush against his shirt as he did to generate a faint sound for her to follow. “My name is Daken Akihiro. I’m a friend of Johnny’s.”

“Oh, hello,” Masters said, putting her hand gently on his for a moment before they both moved their hands to turn it into a gentle shake. “I’m afraid Johnny isn’t here right now… You have very soft hands.”

“I don’t build calluses. Side-effect of my mutation,” Daken replied. “I’m actually looking for Doctor Richards right now. There was…” he let his voice falter, adding a note of quiet anguish. “Something happened, and…”

“Why don’t you come in,” Masters said, stepping back and holding the door for him. “He and Valeria have been working nonstop on who knows what. I’ll show you where they’ve set up… Can I get you anything to drink?”

“That’s very kind of you, but no thank you,” Daken said, walking in and waiting as she closed the door and lead him up the hall.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, and I don’t mean to be rude, I’m just curious,” Masters said as she walked with a confident stride, knowing the hallway well enough that she didn’t need to see it. “You have a… a very sweet smell?”

“Yes, I thought it must be, because you mentioned that,” Masters said, nodding. “Is it a pheromone?”

“Very good. So long as I stay calm, my scent stays sweet,” Daken agreed. “If I got upset, you might pick up on a sourness.”

“That’s very interesting,” Masters noted, voice rich with earnestness. “And the soft hands? That’s…” she trailed off, obviously trying to puzzle out how those would be related.

“Different expression of my x-gene,” Daken explained, and tilted his head slightly, listening to an unusually heavy tread coming across the floor in one of the rooms up ahead. “The soft skin comes from my healing-factor.”

“I see,” Masters nodded. “Is that often the case? For mutants to have two separate powers that aren’t really related?”

“There actually does seem to be some esoteric kind of connection, though I’m not sure anybody’s really made sense of why,” Daken replied. “But the healing factor is actually hereditary, which is something that happens about thirty percent of the time with second-generation mutants.”

“Oh I didn’t know that.”

“Hey, ‘Licia, who was at the--” Ben started as he leaned out into the hallway. He froze, his eyes going wide. “What in the name’a Clarabell’s underoos are you doin’ here?!” he demanded, glaring furiously. “‘Licia, get away from that sonova crocodile!”
“You’re in entirely the wrong class, Ben, wolverines are mammals,” Daken drawled as Masters took three quick steps away from him while turning, startled and nervous at Ben’s reaction.

“You gotta lotta nerve, Daken,” Ben growled through his teeth, advancing to put himself between Daken and Masters.

Daken pulled the phone out of his pocket and swished through his apps, opening the photo gallery as he replied, “This is a peaceful visit. Haven’t you heard I’m on the ‘good guy’ side of things these days?”

“You get outta my house!” Ben snarled, within arms reach now and holding up a threatening fist. Then he faltered as Daken turned the phone around and held it up to his face. Ben stared in confusion at the photo on the screen for a minute before his eyes shifted back to Daken’s. “... What am I supposed to be lookin’ at?” he demanded in a guarded voice, though it had definitely come down several notches in aggression.

“You’re lying if you say that face doesn’t look familiar, or at least it bares a certain resemblance to one you know,” Daken scoffed. “My little brother. He’s dead. The X-Men and every other venerated hero and genius we’ve tried have all failed to find the monster that murdered him. It is still out there, and it is ludicrously dangerous.”

“... Y’er lookin’ for Reed,” Ben said, he relaxed his ready-to-brawl stance and crossed his arms. “... Sorry about your brother.”

“... I want that thing to pay... But I also have three little sisters and a child to worry about,” Daken said, putting his phone back into his pocket and looking away. “The creature needs to be neutralized. Everyone else has failed to do anything useful, so I rather think it’s time to escalate this help-ticket.”

Ben was quiet for a minute, then he gave a slight nod and turned around. “Fine. Common. But I’m keepin’ an eye on you.”

“And yet I’m behind you,” Daken noted, rolling his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Ben. He said he was a friend of Johnny’s. It sounded like the truth,” Masters said quietly, standing in the doorway to a sitting room.

“’Cause it is the truth. You know Johnny ain’t got no taste in people,” Ben snorted.

“So true. He’s friends with you, after all,” Daken said.

“Hey, button that lip or I’ll knock out a few teeth,” Ben snapped.

“Admit it, Ben, you’ve missed this. You’ve missed us,” Daken simpered.

“What’d I just say?”

“Oh I’m sorry, I didn’t catch it. I was too entranced by your manly manly posturing,” Daken flustered. “Your unparalleled machismo literally drives me to distraction, Ben.”

“God damn it! Knock it off!” Grim exclaimed.

“Ooh, a real swear? How can you still deny the passion between us?” Daken kept pestering. “Run away with me, Ben.”
“Shut up!”

“Ben, what’s wrong?” Susan asked, coming around a corner up ahead, then she went still for a moment, like Ben had, as she laid eyes on Daken, before switching to a politely neutral smile. “Daken, what a surprise. What can we do for you?”

Daken faltered and remembered why he was here, he paused where he was for a moment, biting his lip. “… Yes. That’s…”

“Your brother,” Ben reminded him, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

“Yes. I know. I just-- I try to shelve it every moment I can’t be proactive about it.” Daken closed his eyes and shook his head. “He was killed. My brother. By an extraterrestrial. Nobody has been successful tracking the thing. And I recalled that your husband had demonstrated a particular knack in the past for rooting out aliens that nobody else could pin down.”

“Wait, an alien? This ain’t one’a the ‘poisons’?” Ben demanded, turning to look at Daken again.

“Yes,” Daken nodded.

“… Aw, criminy. So it’s got symbiote powers and whatever the kid had?” Ben cringed.

“He had the same power-set as our father, with the addition of a partial mineral-form shift,” Daken replied.

“Ben, what symbiote? What are we talking about here?” Susan demanded, looking back and forth between them.

“Rather than having to repeat myself several times, could explanations perhaps be done in your husband’s presence?” Daken countered, trying to keep his voice soft against a surge of annoyance as a simple walk down the hall was becoming a series of roadblocks.

“… All right,” Susan nodded and cast him a beckoning wave as she started to turn down the hall. “I’ll take him, Ben.”

“You sure?” Ben asked dubiously.

“I’m sure,” Susan agreed. “Thank you, Ben.”

Daken followed her and Ben faded back the direction they’d come; presumably to guard Masters. Daken made his stride quicker than Susan’s, to come alongside her and give her a closer look, eyes flickering over her face. “… I don’t mean to imply that it’s in any way to your detriment--”

“I’m older than you were expecting,” Susan finished for him.

“Yes,” Daken nodded.

“It’s been nine years for me,” Susan explained, glancing back to meet his eyes.

“I see,” Daken said and lowered his eyes, catching his lower lip between his teeth for a moment, then looked up at her again. “Have you been informed about Medusa working your brother over?”

Susan pursed her lips and drew a heavy sigh, then nodded. “You are the eleventh person to call or pull me aside to tell me about Medusa,” she said quietly.

“… Well. For a while I was concerned that nobody seemed openly perturbed about it, it’s good to
hear that wasn’t the case. I suppose everyone’s just become very wary of the Inhuman propaganda-machine,” Daken noted, the corner of his lip curling in an undeliberate sneer. “After all, they managed to spin anybody raising a complaint against genocide into an attack on their culture. I suppose it’s true that the art of propaganda really was perfected in the nineteen forties.”

Susan sighed through her nose as she bit her lip. “… We should have been here,” she said softly. “… We made a decision that seemed like the right one at the time, but…”

Daken frowned, side-eyeing her. “You made a decision?” he repeated.

Susan didn’t look back at him. She stank of guilt. “Think of it as a Habitat for Humanity style working-vacation,” she said.

A moment of numb shock slowly gave way to anger that rose like bile in his throat. “… You left on purpose,” Daken growled.

“We were forced to leave, by a catastrophe no one even remembers,” Susan shook her head, then pursed her lips for a minute, eyes on the floor ahead of her. “… But we chose to stay away.”

“You let Johnny think you were dead,” Daken hissed. “You tortured him.”

“That’s the least of what I did to Johnny. He just doesn’t remember the rest,” Susan whispered, and then swallowed hard. Misery, guilt, shame rose off of her, accompanied by a hint of salt as she blinked quickly. “… Honestly, I think at first… I think for a long time… I wasn’t planning on ever coming back… I thought… I shouldn’t be in his life.”

“… What did you do?”

Susan shook her head again. “Johnny hasn’t given me the chance to explain it to him. I’m not going to give you a play-by-play. It’s-- We undid it. That’s why we couldn’t take Johnny and Ben with us… Keeping them tied to the Earth, when we reset the clock on reality, it erased the trauma.”

Daken stared at her, a cold feeling settling into his gut, sickness crowding out anger for a moment. “… Are you telling me that you abused him and then buried yourself in excuses while denying him so much as the reality to validate what had been done to him?”

She stared back at him silently for over a minute. Her cheeks were wet by the time she shakily breathed, “… Yes.”

He wanted to hurt her. He limited the impulse to a bruising grip as he kept hold of her shoulders. “… I noticed that Johnny hasn’t been through the front door or in this hall since you got home,” he whispered. “No recent scent of him.”

“After it came out that there hadn’t been a force keeping us away, he… he was angry,” Susan whispered. “He said he needed some time to process it before he could look at me again.”

“So that’s the straw, is it?” Daken asked. “Someone finally pushed him so hard he pushed back?
How does it feel to be the *abuser* who finally crossed that line?"

“... Like I don’t know myself anymore.” Susan finally pushed him back, averting her eyes and sniffing. “... I wasn’t sure I could ever face him at all. The idea of never seeing him again hurt, but trying to *explain*? Terrifying… I ran away. It was cowardly. And I told myself that it was what *he* needed.”

“... If you’re trying to impress me with your crocodile-tears, you’re *failing*. Your self-pity is disgusting,” Daken growled. “I’d walk out of here right now if I had any other options left at all.”

Susan pursed her lips and nodded, eyes squeezed shut for a moment before she turned and started down the hall again.

Chapter End Notes

I guess we're all just forgetting how super fucked up that whole thing got in Secret Wars, or that the inter-universal road trip was voluntary, and not telling anybody... We hear the F4 referenced as Marvel's 'First Family' or something ostentatious like that now and again, but god damn, this is a fucked up family.

I'm super tired right now... I want to say something witty and relevant here, but nothing's coming to me. So, whateves. I'll go get some rest instead.
“Hello smart-house, or smart-gate, or smart-something, I’m Bobby Drake. I told Rogue I was coming?” Bobby said to the small screen on the Avengers Mansion front gate.

“It’s not simple. It’s not simple.”

“Well, so are you, I guess,” Bobby said with a shrug, feeling awkward again.

“Uhuh. This kind of uncomfortable is best served with snacks,” Johnny said, leading Bobby through the wide central hallway. “Like stupidly unhealthy sugar-snacks.”

“Did I hear ‘cake’?” a woman’s voice called. “Let’s do this up right, Johnny! Cake, cocktails, eighties feel-good mov-- uh...” Janet van Dyne came strolling around a corner, heels clacking against the floorboards, and then faltered as she spotted Bobby. “Hi. You’re… visiting Rogue?”

Bobby pointed wordlessly at Johnny as Johnny responded to the Wasp, “Sorry, Jan. You’re not invited to cake today.”

“Psst! You mean you’re not invited to cake.” Janet quipped, spinning on an impractical heel and giving a lackadaisical wave. “Let me know if you change your mind about eighties nostalgia!” She disappeared back around the corner and the click of her heels faded.
“... Sooo...” Bobby prompted lamely. “Cake?”

“Or something,” Johnny agreed, starting down the main gallery again. A pause stretched into awkward silence as they walked through the ground floor of the mansion, the only significant sound their footsteps, until something annoyingish caught Bobby’s ear and grew louder, closer. It sounded like speech, but with no possible space for breath.

He heard Johnny groan in reluctant annoyance, apparently on edge and irritable. He pushed a cherry-wood door open with an air of effort, and the hummingbird babble spilled out as Bobby followed him into a turn-of-the-20th-chic styled kitchen.

The room was occupied by Wanda Maximoff, sitting at a table by the bay window, and a motion-blur which was apparently the source of the rapid patter. Bobby couldn’t hear anything but a mashup of unintelligible vowels and consonants, but Wanda was nodding as she sipped at a cup of tea and responding in what Bobby had to assume were appropriate ways. “Uhuh. Right. But you didn’t? That’s good.”

“Jesus Christ, Pietro, the kitchen’s not going anywhere!” Johnny snapped, scrubbing a hand through his hair.

“Hey fuck you Storm!” the blur shot back, coming to a stop, and the person standing there was about fifteen years too young to be Pietro, but otherwise a deadringer. “Idontcall you names!”

“Tommy!” Wanda admonished, apparently shocked by the language.

“Sorry Tommy,” Johnny sighed, grinding his knuckles against his forehead. “I couldn’t actually see you, so I just assumed it was the guy who lives here.” He walked over to the fridge and opened the door to hide himself behind.

“Yeah, well you know what assuming makes the both of us,” Speed scoffed and took a gulp from the mug in his hand, leaning against the counter. He turned his eyes to Bobby and raised one white eyebrow at him. “What’s up, FroBro? Hanging out at Casa Avengers today?”

“Why not? Seems like it’s the hot place to be right now,” Bobby countered.

“So it does,” a familiar voice agreed behind him, and Bobby jumped slightly and turned.

“Weekends are for going a’calling, yes? Hey, Bobby,” Gambit cast him a smile.

“Hi,” Bobby nodded back.

“Gambit, you want pie or cheesecake?” Johnny called.

Gambit tilted his head and considered a moment. “What kind of pie?”

“Blueberry.”

“It’s June. Dose blueberries are frozen and a year old,” Gambit scoffed. “Go wit’ de cheesecake.”

“Check,” Johnny straightened up, balancing a bakery box on one hand as he pushed the fridge closed.

“... Wait, why are you--?” Bobby asked, glancing back and forth between Johnny and Gambit as Johnny pulled plates, more than two of them, out of one of the cabinets. “No. No. This is not--”

“Oh my God, take a pill,” Johnny snapped, setting the plates on the counter for a moment as he
pulled a drawer open and grabbed forks out of it. “I’m having a day. You decide to come over uninvited because you want to talk? Fine. On my terms. Or you can leave.”

“Johnny. Down a notch, okay?” Gambit sighed and put a hand on Bobby’s shoulder. “It ain’t no shake-down, Bobby. Nobody’s gonna accuse you of anyt’ing or t’reaten you.”

“That part’s already been taken care of,” Bobby shot back, irritated, uncomfortable, embarrassed.

Gambit looked like he was about to respond, when the conversation was derailed by the door suddenly slamming open behind them. A dark haired girl in sweatpants came careening into the kitchen at a dead run. She skidded on her socks, and Tommy was there a microsecond later grabbing her around the waist to keep her from slamming into the counter. “Thanks,” she chirped, ducking down as he let her go and pulling the cabinets under the sink open, frantically rummaging inside.

“Emily, what’s wrong?” Wanda asked, standing up with a worried look on her face.

“The God damned turtle pooped on my rug!” Emily said, pulling spray bottles of cleaning products out and looking at the labels.

“Pretty sure it’s a tortoise,” Tommy noted, grinning in amusement.

“It’s a box-turtle!” Emily snapped.

“Box-turtles are tortoises,” Tommy quipped.

“Why was it even on your rug?” Johnny asked, adding a knife to his stack. “Where’s Pietro?”

“Madripoor. Lorna called him about something,” Emily said, setting one of the spray-bottles on the floor and then getting up to grab a handful of paper-towels. “I said I’d watch his stupid turtle, and he lets it just wander around the floor, but he can beat it to the draw when the stupid little bastard squats. Damn thing was already shitting by the time I put down my book!”

“Oh honey, I’m sorry,” Wanda said with a cringe as Tommy openly laughed and Johnny looked like he was making an excruciating effort not to.

“Damn thing is going back in its God damned terrarium!” Emily announced, running back out the door with her spray bottle and paper towels.

“So dis is Saturday around here,” Gambit said after the door swung shut behind her, giving Bobby’s shoulder a pat as he let it go. He opened the door again and held it; Bobby reluctantly walked through, back into the hall. Gambit grabbed the stack of plates and cutlery off the top of the bakery box as Johnny passed him, and let the door fall shut, cutting off the kitchen and renewed hummingbird-babble from the speedster inside as they trouped back through the hall.

“What did Rogue even tell you guys?” Bobby asked, voice coming out half-growl, half-sigh as exasperated frustration set back in now that the momentary distraction of turtle poop had passed, and Bobby was once again the only captive animal on view for the entertainment or disgust of his audience.

“Ah didn’t say nothin’ except tellin’ Johnny you were lookin’ to talk to him,” Rogue’s voice called from overhead and Bobby twisted around to see her hanging over the railing a flight up the stairs. “He figured he knew what it was about, and--” She gave a sigh and an exaggerated shrug. “Ah don’t see as Ah’m much use to this.”
“You’re the only one who was there with the Twins,” Johnny replied, hitting the stairs and climbing toward her.

“That’s crap. Wanda got the front-row and you didn’t ask her,” Rogue shot back.

“I am not even going to justify that with a response,” Johnny scoffed. “Wanda. Seriously? She’s great and all, but seriously?”

“Rogue, what the hell?” Bobby demanded, shooting her a glare.

“Ah didn’t do anythin’!” Rogue insisted, half floating, half hopping down the stairs until she was next to Bobby and reascending beside him. “Assumin’ Johnny’s right that this’s about Daken, Ah really don’t think Ah have anythin’ much useful to add to that topic, but Ah’ll sit anyhow just to be on your side if nothin’ else. Ah ain’t lettin’ these disreputables gang up on you.”

“I had no intention of dat,” Gambit intoned.

“Undecided,” Johnny said, reaching the top of the stairs and pausing to look back at them. “Everything I’ve heard lately about you and this ambiguous-whatever has been filtered through a kind of unreliable narrator.”

“‘Kind of’ is kind of understating,” Gambit said with a little smirk and a head-shake. “And dat’s somet’ing we need to talk about.”

“So this is a come-to-Jesus then?” Bobby asked, irritation bleeding over into anger. “You’re going to talk me out of--”

“Calm your tits, Bobby, and let’s get out of the damn hall!” Johnny snapped.

“He hasn’t slept,” Rogue murmured next to Bobby’s ear. “Runnin’ on nothin’ but coffee and sugar.”

“No, y’know what? You’re being an ass-hole, and for whatever unspecified very-good-reason that’s happening, I don’t have to excuse it!” Bobby announced, glaring at Johnny. “I came here with a really simple question, and--”

“No. It’s not simple. There’s nothing simple with Daken,” Johnny cut him off, then looked away, eyes downcast. “And, sorry. You’re right. I’m having some problems, and I’m taking them out on you. Sorry.”

“Dis is about simplifying some t’ings,” Gambit said with a shrug and a sympathetic grin. “Or at least about breaking ‘em down for you.”

“And my suggestion to get out of the hall still holds,” Johnny said, pushing a door in and waving them toward the interior. “I don’t like playing the live soap opera for all my friends and colleagues anymore than I have to.”

Still annoyed but somewhat mollified by Johnny’s culping and apology, Bobby let himself be ushered into the room, over to a couch and a few chairs gathered around a coffee table. Johnny put the bakery box down on the table and opened it, pulling a cheesecake out of its depths and reaching for the knife on top of the stack of plates Gambit was depositing there. “So, the answer to your ‘simple question’, Johnny said as he sliced into the cheesecake, “is no. Nothing. I don’t know if Daken said anything to you--”

“He said you watched the moon rise on the beach and then got a hotel room,” Bobby interjected.
Johnny cringed and closed his eyes for a moment. “Technically true,” he sighed and shook his head. “... But sleeping together was of the unconscious variety. We talked. A lot.”

“So you’re not back together?” Bobby asked, dropping onto the couch.

“That’s... The phraseology of ‘back’ is a little...” Johnny sighed again, depression and guilt flickering over his face. Rogue crouched down, taking the knife away from him, and started cutting the cake herself. “... It was always pretend... It was pretend on so many levels,” he said, pushing himself into one of the chairs and slumping.

“You already confirmed yourself--” Bobby started to argue.

“It was physical,” Johnny cut him off. “That doesn’t make it a real relationship. It was...” He paused, biting his lip and looking frustrated. “... Daken didn’t know how real relationships worked, and I stopped doing real relationships a long time ago... Pretend is easier. Pretend doesn’t hurt... or, that was the theory, anyway.”

“... Daken doesn’t talk about you like it was fake,” Bobby said quietly, a new kind of anger starting to simmer deep in him.

“I screwed up,” Johnny said, voice quieter. He shifted, hunching forward, resting his arms against his knees and shaking his dipped head. “I didn’t-- I jumped in too fast, because it didn’t seem like a big deal. I didn’t know how messed up he was.”

“Daken’s damn good at convincin’ people he’s fine and that he’s doin’ exactly what he wants to be doin’,” Rogue said, putting a plate with a piece of cheesecake on it in front of Johnny. “He convinces himself first. Makes himself believe it before he ever starts tryin’ to convince you.”

“And you said you didn’t have anyt’ing to add,” Gambit said with a bittersweet smirk.

“... Ah got Simon’s memories of what he saw with the Twins,” Rogue shook her head, frowning as she put another slice of cheesecake onto a plate and pushed it toward Bobby. “They used Daken like a damn ambassador to talk up the glorious future whenever they didn’t have time to tell us-- Wanda and Simon Ah mean-- about it themselves. And he’d drunk all the damn Kool-Aid.” She pursed her lips for a moment, holding a plate out to Gambit with one hand and picking up another for herself as she rose to her feet and went to sit next to Bobby.

“Dey had four horsemen but it was always Daken dey’d use for a mout’piece?” Gambit asked, settling into a chair with his piece of cake.

“Ah’ve watched Warren fight the connection when Apocalypse was trollin’ him. Hell, Ah’ve felt it,” Rogue said and turned to watch Gambit with a slight pinch to her brow. “And you know the pull. It tries to drag you down, but if you fight, you can keep your head above water.”

“Mhm,” Gambit nodded, watching his fork as he scooped up a bite of cheesecake, his face showing no indication of anything more than mild interest in the topic of Apocalyptic brainwashing.

“The other three were always about two seconds from goin’ maverick for their reasons, but Daken... He was higher on the light and the word than any preacher Ah ever heard,” Rogue explained and then looked down at her own cake for a moment and sighed, shaking her head. “It was Simon who was seein’ that, Ah didn’t until Ah saw it in his memories, and then Ah didn’t understand it ‘til after a few conversations with Logan... The monster that tied him into knots, he ground it into Daken to obey his ‘master’. Ground it in so deep, it came as automatic as breathin’... And the deathseed the Twins put into him, it tapped into that programmin’ and hijacked it.”
“Dat’s part of it, de obedience. De biggest part, probably,” Gambit said with a slow nod. “But also, even wit’out de ‘master’ t’ing happening, Daken wants to please.Needs it.”

“I didn’t know that was…” Johnny whispered, staring down at his cake, a slightly haunted cast to his eyes.

“There was no way you could’ve,” Rogue said, shaking her head. “When Daken wants to sound ‘fine’, he sounds fine.”

“Sometimes,” Gambit amended her. “Moments when he forgets how t’fake it, dat means he’s hurting bad… But dat’s hard to tell, because sometimes he want you to t’ink he more upset dan he is.”

“So you’re saying there’s no way to read him,” Bobby groaned, and then clenched his teeth for a few moments, channelling his frustration into that ache in his jaw.

“Laura can,” Gambit shrugged. “Keep in mind: all total, I’ve only spent maybe a week or two around Daken. And Johnny’s a gullible fool. I’m not saying it’s impossible, just hard.”

“So, what is happening right now?” Bobby asked, glancing around at them. “Is this some panel-of-experts advice thing? Are we saying that you all want me to go sweep Daken off his feet?”

“You need a reality check. Daken’s a queen, not a princess. You’re not going to sweep him off his feet,” Johnny rolled his eyes.

“Sarcastic witticisms aside, is that what’s happening right now?” Bobby demanded.

Johnny disassembled a small piece of cake with his fork until it was more or less loose cream cheese. “... He keeps talking about you. And sometimes he’s mad, sometimes he’s... I don’t know, wistful? But he keeps talking about you. I get the impression that there’s some kind of chemistry there. So now I’m trying to figure out if this is one of Daken’s typical bad decisions, or if you’re... I want him to be happy. I want him to have something good.”

“Mm, it is not fair, no matter what we’re talking about, to put Bobby on the same board wit’ ‘Daken’s typical bad decisions’, ” Gambit pointed out, wrinkling his nose.

“Pause pause pause pause,” Johnny said, dropping his plate on his lap and T-ing his hands. “Did you cut him in half? Was that a literal thing that happened or an exaggeration?”

“... It was a literal thing that happened,” Bobby closed his eyes and scrubbed his hands over his face. “Logan says Daken’s scared of how he ‘reacts’ to violence, instead of being scared of me directly, or- or-- I’m not sure I know exactly what that means.”

“It means that Daken was brought up to think of somebody who tears him in half as the boss of him,” Rogue said, shaking her head. “So now maybe he’s tryin’ to separate if he just likes you or if what was done to him is colorin’ his perspective... Bobby it’s- it’s really hard to sort out basically anythin’ when you’re not sure if a feelin’ is comin’ from your heart or somethin’ that’s been put into you.”

“Dere’s some more to it den dat even,” Gambit said quietly, brow pinched. “You’re understanding dis based on what Logan’s said, what Logan knows. And Logan knows from conditioning. He knows being twisted like a windup toy and set loose... But he don’t know what powers like Daken’s can do to child just by having ‘em. Can do to how he sees himself and what he supposed to be.”
“You think his powers have more to do with any of it than what Romulus did to him?” Rogue gave him an incredulous grimace.

“Not ‘more’, just dat dey matter in dis,” Gambit shook his head. “Dey’re a piece.”

“Because his powers are a drug,” Johnny said quietly. “His powers make people feel good, and they make people want him… So then he’s the drug. And he sees himself as something that’s supposed to be used.”

“Yes!” Gambit said, pointing at Johnny. “But it ain’t dat clean. Ain’t dat simple. He can’t tell if he’s getting used or if he’s using… Daken got his powers too young.” He gave a heavy sigh. “I may sound bold, talking about his powers like I know ‘em, but hang wit’ me a spell… Now, his power is in his skin and mine’s here.” He pointed at his throat. “Roll dat together with la Rocha, he’s on de psi-spectrum, and dere’s not’ing in common dere, right? Not’ing except de way people respond, de effect on ‘em if we cut loose. And on us.”

“Charm, we get it,” Rogue said, still looking a bit skeptical. “Bein’ unnaturally charmin’ to the point morality’s bein’ bent or broken by it.”

“Dat’s a way t’put it,” Gambit agreed and looked down at his cake for a moment. “Daken caught it a lot worse’n me. We were bot’ too young, but Jean-Luc protected me best as could be expected. He tried hard, and he kept my body safe… But dere’s some effects… dere’s not much to do about. I was just too young. T’ink of a child, he sees a shiny toy and he wants dat t’ing, and he knows you’ll give it to him if he charms you enough… Even a mutant popped at de normal time would have been too young.”

“It doesn’t take being part of the charm-powers club to understand self-exploitation,” Johnny pointed out, a hint of annoyance in his voice.

“Maybe.” Gambit closed his eyes and shrugged. “Dani’s talked a time or two about Gail damaging her girl by making Laurie afraid of her powers... but I gotta side wit’ Gail. A fifteen year old ain’t mature enough to understand what she’s doing to people, what she’s doing to herself… Maybe a twenty year old ain’t mature enough.” He leaned back and shook his head, wearing a frustrated expression. “Maybe it ain’t even maturity… Maybe it ain’t somet’ing dat can be understood until you had it turn bad on you a time or two.” He looked up, brow pinched. “And Laurie and me, I’m talking about children who were protected by someone smart enough to look and see dat our powers were gonna be as dangerous to ourselves as to anybody else… Daken got de exact opposite. He got de worst it could be, and he got it for a long long time.”

Bobby stared blankly down at the coffee table for a while. “... So what’s the takeaway here? What am I doing with this?”

“You’re trying to understand what Daken’s thinking, or what’s still going on even when he’s not thinking,” Johnny said. “I… didn’t understand anything when I met him… I just saw somebody hot and flirty, and didn’t second-guess it. I live in a fake world where people are fake, and that’s just my normal. That’s how you avoid getting hurt… But it backfired, because that’s the world he was trying to get out of, even if he didn’t realize it. So… I hurt him.”

“What did you do?” Bobby demanded, voice coming out quiet but with a sharper edge than he’d intended.

“Everything wrong, start to finish?” Johnny shrugged, a helpless expression on his face. “Fell into bed on a whim, didn’t think anything of it until– until Daken started getting really intense and saying things, telling me things that were… that just made it really obvious there was nothing
casual about it for him.” He looked at the table and bit his lip for a few seconds. “... And then, like
the stupid, fake person that I am, I just said ‘why not?’ and went with it. Play the part and be the
person everyone wants, make myself believe it... I’ve been doing that since I was seven. It’s how I live… And that was a terrible decision. That was the last thing he needed… And then I got my ass killed by the bug-devil and abandoned him.”

“... You pretended to love him?” Bobby asked quietly, glaring at him.

Johnny furrowed his brow and swallowed, still staring at the table for a few seconds before lifting
his head and meeting Bobby’s eyes. “Did you ‘pretend’ to love Polaris?” he asked. It felt like a
punch in the gut, and it effectively took any righteous outrage Bobby might have been brewing
realize that that’s not me.”

“You’ve got to remember dat it don’t matter if Daken likes you or don’t, he’s gonna hide how he
feels eider way, because he hides it from himself most of de time.” Gambit put his empty plate on
the table and leaned back in his seat. “He’s been pretending for a long time, and pretending well,
that he’s happy wit’ picking up strangers in clubs. He wouldn’ta had a lot of choice about it, being
a ghost assassin all his life, so I imagine he jus’ told himself it was fine, and he was fine, and dat
was dat… I’ve got some experience dere,” he said. “And Bobby, you keep going down dis rabbit
hole, you’re gonna get dat a lot. Daken’s going to just tell you he’s fine all de time.”

“That’s…” Bobby frowned, the last statement catching in his craw.

“If he starts to trust you, he’ll open up about the stuff that’s happened in his life, but yeah, the ‘I’m
fine, everything is fine’ goes on until everything’s a hundred times not-fine and way past fixing,”
Johnny added, a pinched sound to his voice.

Bobby pursed his lips, staring at the table top.

“What?” Gambit’s voice asked. “You’re making a face, Bobby. What?”

“Just… Trying to understand what you mean, because… I don’t know,” Bobby shook his head.
“There’s been a couple times he seemed kind of off, like the way he was talking or acting felt
wrong-ish. So I asked if he was okay, and he just said he’s never okay…” He glanced up and found
Gambit tilting his head slightly to the side and giving him a curious look. Johnny was blank,
staring straight ahead of him.

“Well dat is interesting.”

“So he’s not performin’ for Bobby then?” Rogue asked, looking at Gambit.

Gambit shook his head. “You’re trying to pull a simple answer where dere are no simple answers,”
he said. “He’s doing somet’ing a bit different now, dat’s all we can be sure of.”

“It is different though,” Johnny said quietly. “He approached me the same way he approaches any
patsy or anonymous hookup. And maybe he’s opened up to me a lot since then, but he still defaults
to pandering… So he sweeps whatever he’s feeling under the rug unless he can use the feelings to
pander better.”

“Could be timing,” Gambit said with a shrug. “He’s been letting the savoir-faire slip more and
more since he’s been at de school. Time was he only did dat for Laura, but he’s letting his edges
show around me now.” He glanced down for a moment with his eyes, wetting his lip as he paused.
“It’s a different t’ing from just telling you t’ings. Yes, letting you in on his personal dark ages
means a lot of trust, but changing de way he talks is a different kind of trust… Maybe more like a trust of a place, rader dan trust of a person. He’s feeling more secure in his place now, not so afraid it’s going to be taken away or force him out.”

“That does make a hell of a difference,” Rogue agreed softly.

“Okay, so the lesson is I’m not special, Rachel is,” Bobby sighed.

“Don’t fish, Bobby,” Rogue scoffed.

“The lesson is: Daken’s in a really different head-space than he was five years ago,” Johnny corrected. “When I met him, he’d spent the last half-century deliberately repressing anything vaguely resembling hopes or dreams, and he hadn’t put any thought into what he wanted past what he was told to want.” He got out of his chair and crouched down to cut another piece of cheesecake. “But he’s spent basically his entire life forced into being alone, and… I mean, suddenly adopting a kid is a pretty big thing, but aside from that, a lot of other stuff he says and does lately makes it seem like he’s way past ready for some kind of settling down… So if you’re looking for no-pressure, casual dating, then you need to stop screwing around and cut him loose.”

“That’s a bit much, Johnny,” Rogue said, wrinkling her nose.

“Not really. I’m just telling him the page Daken’s on, and Bobby needs to either get on it too or close the book,” Johnny replied with an irritable shrug as he climbed back into his chair with his cake.

“People date before they tie the knot,” Rogue protested. “You can’t be sayin’ Bobby’s gotta pick out a china pattern before they even have drinks.”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Johnny retorted. “I’m saying he needs to consider what stage of his life he’s at. If he wants to play the field for a few years, then he should go hit up the clubs and leave Daken alone.”

“Last fall I tried to move two and a half thousand miles to shack up with a guy I’d met twice,” Bobby noted, staring down at the coffee table. “So… apparently I’m stupidly desperate to ‘settle down’?”

“That’s-- wow. Yeah, I’m going to have to echo the ‘stupidly’ on that,” Johnny said, his voice sounded like he was grimacing; Bobby didn’t look up to confirm. “So, what, your zeal scared him off?”

“No, Daken did,” Bobby shook his head and sighed.

“Like… a jealousy thing?”

“Revenge for the cutting-in-half incident,” Bobby leaned back into the couch cushions and squeezed his eyes shut. “He figured he couldn’t hurt me physically, but he could take something away from me.”

“That… seems really unhealthy…” Johnny noted.

“You haven’t heard how Daken scared him off,” Gambit said with a morbid chuckle.

“Can we move on, please?” Bobby cringed. “I’m sorry I brought that subject up.”

“Uh, not with a teaser like that. What did he do?” Johnny demanded.
“Non-lethal stabbing,” Bobby groaned. “There were... a lot of layers to that. He was under the influence of an off-leash deathseed at the time, among other stuff.”

“Wooow, yeah, I can’t even unpack that right now, so I think you’re right about moving on,” Johnny said, shaking his head. “So, anyway, I heard there was some issue he was mad about last week?”

“There was a chain of things he was mad about last week. I make him mad,” Bobby replied with a dejected shrug.

“He thinks you hate sex-workers or something?”

“Wha-- No! That is not what happened!” Bobby protested, flustering. “He-- After we got Bellona back from the Hydra goons, Daken offered to pay me back for helping him. And I was super not-comfortable with that precedent, and he got really offended when I turned it down...”

“Yeah, dat- dat is a t’ing he’s got a lot of issues wit’,” Gambit sighed, shaking his head. “He’s real paranoid about being rejected. And I don’t mean some MRA crap about not getting what he wants, I mean if you say ‘slow down’ he hears ‘get away from me forever’. And I’m not telling you to accept dat and give into his tantrums, I’m just saying it’s somet’ing you should be aware of, so you know what’s happening when he starts t’rowing a fit... Dat over-sensitivity is what made him run away from Logan de first time. And dat turned into five. damn. years. of stupidity on bot’ sides.” He paused for a moment, catching the corner of his lip between his teeth, brows furrowed. “.. And also important to be aware dat most of his life, he’s been taught dat he’s only good for two t’ings.”

“Yeah, he’s brought that up,” Bobby agreed, feeling a bit sickened.

“For a long time he didn’t know any kind of relationship dat didn’t start and end in bed. Laura taught him how to do family, but he still hadn’t figured out friends when I was wit’ him after Sarah’s funeral,” Gambit said in a quieter voice, looking down with a slightly sad smile on his face. “It’s why I started calling him my frère. ‘Bout de time he got into my lap, I figured I needed to set up some context dat would shut dat down wit’out hurting him.”

“Why is this the first Ah’m herein’ about Daken gettin’ into your lap?” Rogue demanded, side-eyeing him.

“Daken’s like Oliver. He sees a lap, he gets in it,” Gambit replied with a dismissive hand-wave; Rogue rolled her eyes. “Daken’s very physical,” Gambit lost the flippant tone as he leaned forward and watched Bobby with an unwaveringness that was slightly uncomfortable. “And I don’t just mean sexuality, I don’t even just mean touching, I mean everyt’ing. If you want to know what’s going on in his head, his body-language is gonna mean more dan whatever he’s saying. Pay attention to how he’s moving, how much space he’s putting between himself and you, and-- You know you should really get a book or watch some videos or somet’ing on nonverbal-communication.”

“And maybe when Daken says something that doesn’t immediately seem important or relevant in your head, instead of just assuming he’s making excuses or being irrational, you could try politely asking him to explain it,” Johnny said in a sober, quiet voice, looking at the table. “And if he doesn’t want to explain it, maybe back off because it’s probably really personal.”

“Yeah, okay, got that memo punched into me, thanks,” Bobby grimaced.

“Oh he didn’t mention punching you,” Johnny noted with a little nod.
“I grabbed his arm when he didn’t want me to, and I think he went into some kind of PTSD-panic,” Bobby said quietly, feeling crappier as he articulated it out loud.

“Oh, no, Bobby, if somebody says not to touch ‘em, it don’t matter if it’s just the arm, you don’t touch ‘em,” Rogue said with a cringe.

“He didn’t say it, but he kept, like, refusing to go up the stairs, because I think he didn’t want to walk past me…” Bobby said, looking down and fidgeting uncomfortably.

“Yeah, dat’d be de body-language t’ing I was talking about,” Gambit sighed, and then glanced at Johnny. “Dere was some oder t’ing not being communicated?”

“I only got the abridged version, but it sounded like Daken shut down hard when Bobby tried to argue with ‘no’.”

“Why do you have to phrase it like that?” Bobby demanded.

“Because that’s how he phrased it,” Johnny shrugged.

“Well he’d been avoiding me for two days, so ‘I have to shower’ sounded like a pretty stupid excuse. But it turns out he’s really serious about showering,” Bobby groaned.

“Showering?” Rogue asked.

“Apparently the rule is never bother him before his morning shower,” Bobby shrugged helplessly.

“… Huh.” Gambit wore a puzzled frown and glanced to Johnny again. “You know what dat’s about?”

“… He was sweaty,” Johnny said quietly, glancing away.

Gambit continued to look puzzled, but Rogue’s eyebrows went up a couple seconds later and she drew a little breath through her mouth. “Bobby, besides that book on ‘nonverbal-communication’, try readin’ up on pheromones a bit. Ah expect there’s misunderstandin’s that might be avoided if you try to know what Daken’s dealin’ with there, since apparently he can’t be bothered to say,” she said, turning to look at him again.

Bobby stared at her for a moment, feeling increasingly stupid second by second. Blitheringly stupid, like he’d felt during the minute or two when he’d been in flesh-form at Daken’s door that morning. Sweaty. He’d been sweaty. Bobby had been near-dumbfounded by his sweatiness, and he’d stupidly thought it was just the way Daken glistened. “Oh.”

“So… this is something that he’s not going to say, but Daken gets really insecure about his powers sometimes… and he gets paranoid about whether they’re the only reason somebody likes him,” Johnny explained quietly, looking off to the side, his brow pinched. “And none of that is to be repeated, ever. He will be super pissed at both of us if you mention I said it.”

“I won’t,” Bobby said.

“Dat’s… a reasonable t’ing to be paranoid about,” Gambit sighed, shaking his head. “My voice, it took a while to learn how to control it, I was near twenty before I really had it, but once I did, it was a t’ing I could turn on and off. And when I turn it off, it’s just off,” he said. “But Daken, a lot of pheromones are going to stay sitting on his skin and clodes… S’why he was trying to go straight for a shower when he came in sweaty, I imagine.”
“... Right…” Bobby agreed, pinching the bridge of his nose, feeling queasy and stupid.

“Bobby, it’s an easy thing to miss. It’s not somethin’ a body normally thinks about,” Rogue said gently, putting an arm around his shoulders and leaning into him. “You just need to slow down and ask questions more.”

“Yeah,” Bobby nodded.

“So, you missed or ignored a few cues and got pushy when you shouldn’t have,” Johnny said, and Bobby gritted his teeth, irritated at him for rubbing it in. “But when Daken threw himself at you in a not-okay way, you turned him down… And yeah, that might have pissed him off, but it also impressed him.”

Bobby glanced up at him hesitantly. “... Yeah?”

Johnny shrugged. “It made an impression, anyway,” he said. “Daken brought it up a couple of times the other day. It seemed like he wasn’t sure whether or not he liked it… but you didn’t just tell him, you showed him that what’s going on with you isn’t plain lust.”

“... Thanks,” Bobby whispered.

Johnny looked down at his knees. “... I’m sorry for being a dick. This is really hard,” he said softly. “I’m mad at you for being better than me.”

Bobby bit his lip, feeling unbearably awkward, as his mind raced to come up with a response to that.

“Just in this one way, I mean,” Johnny added, voice a little stronger. “Because obviously I’m smarter, prettier, and cooler than you.”

Feeling relieved that Johnny was the one to break his own awkward pause, Bobby quipped, “Now, what’s cooler than being cool?”

“Oh, you know where you can shake it? Right on out of here,” Johnny shot back with a grimace.

Chapter End Notes

This was really hard to write. Dialogue-intensive segments with nothing happening are hard, but also this was sort of like intense exposition in dialogue-form, which is also hard? And I usually only have two characters in play when I'm doing an feelings dialogue, keeping four characters engaged is hard! I think I must have deleted at lease four pages in this because of how much I kept going back and rewriting. Like pulling damn teeth. So I'm exhausted. And now there's more to write! Crap! It's almost 40 and this bullshit is still going on!
Daken would have been a philosophy major.

“Chess club. It says they also play checkers, go and shogi,” Daken said, reading off his tablet screen.

“Chess club? You’re joking, right?” Zach grimaced.

“Anime club… anime club?” Daken wrinkled his nose. “Does that even involve any interaction, or does everybody just sit staring at a screen for two hours?”

“Would critically discussing anime be better?” Zach quipped, raising an eyebrow.

“Maybe if you’re critically discussing the problematic, socially-irresponsible representations it’s rife with,” Daken sighed, shaking his head and scrolling down. “Horticulture club.”

“What’s horticulture.” Zach didn’t put the inflection of a question into it, making it clear he didn’t really care.

“Agriculture is the cultivation of crops and livestock on a very large scale, such as to support a civilization. Horticulture is the same but on a small scale, such as to support a family,” Daken explained.

“Pass.”

“Debate club.”

“No,” Zach groaned.

“Philosophy club,” Daken continued.


Daken raised an eyebrow at him. “Philosophy is the quintessential foundation to ethics and existential meaning in general.”

“I’m fifteen,” Zach pointed out.

“Fair enough,” Daken shrugged. “Board games club. That’s fairly open-ended. It would probably lend itself well to casual conversation and getting to know your peers better.”

“Ungh!” Zach put his hands over his face.

“It’s two hours, once a week, and it sounds very low-pressure,” Daken pointed out. “Try it for a month?”

Zach put his hands down and crossed his arms, slumping back into the couch and pouting. “Fine. Are we done?”

“I’d like you to pick one more, please,” Daken said calmly scrolling the rest of the way down the page. “Either one of the previous, or engineering club, news club, or photography club.”

“Those are all dumb,” Zach spat.

“It looks like the engineering club mostly builds robots,” Daken noted.
“Dumb.”

“Zach,” Daken said quietly, and Zach squirmed, obviously uncomfortable, annoyed. “You like taking pictures and vlogging with your phone. Either photography or the school news site could lend itself to that.”

“... I don’t want them telling me what to take pictures of,” Zach whined.

“I imagine photography club will be focused more on techniques and composition, showing you how to make the photos of your chosen subject matter more aesthetically effective... The news site would probably have a wider variety of things to do. Research, copy-writing, layout, managing the code of the page,” Daken said, and then waited quietly.

Zach bit his lip and glared at the floor, continuing to squirm uncomfortably. Finally the silence became too much and he looked hesitantly back up at Daken. “... Why do I have to do this?”

“You know why.”

Zach made a miserable whine in the back of his throat and looked at the floor again. “I’m sorry,” he wailed softly.

“It’s not punishment, Zach, but it is something you need to do for your own good. It’s vegetables,” Daken said calmly.

“... Which one should I do?” Zach asked unhappily.

Daken glanced down at the tablet again, considering. “... The news club would be the one where you’re working cooperatively with your peers to produce something meaningful... It’s the most potentially relevant to our place, as mutants, in society. Being that it’s on the web, it can reach people anywhere, excepting in countries whose governments block mutant-related content,” he mused, turning off the tablet’s display and setting it down on the coffee table. “If the articles being posted were engaging, and if there were an effort made to hype the site, it might manage to catch the interest of other high school and college students in the world, curious about mutants and what we think of things.”

“... Okay,” Zach mumbled, eyes still on the floor.

“You’ll give it a try?”

He nodded.

Daken reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you,” he said, and received only squirmy unhappiness in reply. “Do you want to play your Resident Evil now?”

Zach nodded and slid off the couch to go fetch a controller and the remote from under Daken’s television. Daken took his book off the end table and pulled his feet up onto the couch, tucking them next to him as he turned to curl against the juncture of the armrest and back cushions, watching over the top of his open book as Zach settled down on the far side again, starting up his game. Time slipped by to the sounds of ominous music and Valentine’s shocked exclamations, and Daken sank contentedly into Manne’s frank eloquence. He was jarred out of it by a knock at his door; Daken glanced toward it.

“Daken, we need to talk,” Pryde’s voice called over the door’s speaker.

Daken snorted and turned back to his page.
After a minute, there was another knock. “Either you open this door or I will,” Pryde threatened.

Daken growled, sliding his bookmark into place and setting the book down, climbing to his feet. Zach paused his game. “I’ll be right back,” Daken said, going to the door and pulling it open. He gave an underhand wave at Pryde to step back as he heard Zach start playing again, and stepped out into the hall, pulling the door shut behind him. “Yes?” he asked, raising an imperious eyebrow at her.

“So Ben Grimm called me,” Pryde said, frowning up at him.

“How lovely for you,” Daken replied.

“Do you want to guess why Ben Grimm called me?” Her frown deepened.

“Let’s skip the games.”

“I spoke to Reed and he is going to try to build us some kind of alien-finding tech,” Pryde said coolly. “But I told you before: you are off of this.”

Daken pursed his lips for a few seconds, glaring down at her. “You’ve done nothing,” he growled.

“Bullshit,” Pryde snapped. “I’ve had people looking into this since it happened. I never stopped trying, I just kept hitting brick walls.”

“And yet I was the only one who thought of Richards?” Daken countered.

“They only got back from the alleged-dead last night. So no, I’m sorry, I hadn’t thought of it in the first fifteen hours of that being the case,” Pryde retorted. “It was a good idea. Thank you. You had a good idea. But Daken, you are too close to take point on this. You are emotionally compromised and that leads to mistakes.”

“Mistakes? Mistakes happen in complex operations. This couldn’t be simpler. That thing needs to be dead,” Daken snarled.

“That thing survived what for all we know was the extinction of its entire species,” Pryde shot back, glaring defiantly into his eyes. “Do you really think a little stabbing is going to faze it?”

“Well after that I’ll probably move on to fire, acid, maybe throw it into a nuclear reactor,” Daken scoffed.

“Right, this is sounding like such a simple operation!” Pryde’s voice rose a bit. “Get your head out of your ass. We can’t execute something if we don’t know how.”

“As if you’d ever have the balls to execute so much as a cockroach.”

“I’ve got a guy who’s got a plan. Which is more than I can say about you.”

“What guy?” Daken demanded, dropping a helping of fear and discomfort.

“You are off of this,” Pryde snapped, seeming unaffected.

“What. guy?” Daken growled through his teeth.

“Just so you know, in case you’re trying to hit me with some enhanced-intimidation right now, I’m phased,” Pryde growled at him.
Daken snarled in consternation at her.

“Daken, I need you here. Protecting these kids,” Pryde told him in a dark, sober tone. “Maybe you want to be out there killing things, because you think that it’s the only way to get closure or because it’s just easier. But you are not the one who can be the most effective on this mission, and it’s not where you’re going to make the biggest difference. You have people to protect here.”

Daken glared down at her for another minute. “... Do you really intend to execute it?” he asked, listening closely for a lie.

“I’m going to extradite it,” Pryde said.

“What?”

“... I know this is personal for you, Daken, but I need you to step back and think about numbers,” Pryde said grimly. “Mutantity, the planet Earth, we lost one. The Klyntar lost a lot more. An entire species needs closure. And not just the kind of closure stab-it-in-the-heart gets you, they need the kind of closure that comes from having a trial and feeling like justice is more than an abstract concept.”

Daken looked away, clenching his jaw and swallowing. He glared at nothing for a minute before responding. “... You’re passing the buck.”

“Am I uncomfortable with making the decision to execute a sentient being? Yes,” Pryde said. “But it’s also a decision I don’t have anywhere near as much right to make as they do. And it’s one they need to make. They’re rebuilding their society after a massive trauma and countless deaths. They need a trial, Daken. They need to take back some kind of agency.”

She wasn’t lying about her intentions. She’d been holding back for much of the conversation, but her feelings about the importance of the trial were true. Maybe naïve, but true. Alien solutions to alien problems. Were the closure needs of society, alien or otherwise, greater than his own individualistic ones? Problems of trolleys and utilitarians. But statistics were high that some of them had lost family too, invalidating the core of such a philosophical debate. Daken closed his eyes and bit down hard on his lip. “Fine,” he whispered. “... I want something to bury when they’re done.”

“Okay,” Pryde said, voice soft now.

“Are we done?” Daken asked.

“Yeah,” Pryde nodded.

Daken turned back around, scanning his thumb and pushing the door back in. Ominous music and gunfire sounded for a few seconds before switching to the neutrality of a pause, as Zach looked over at him. “Is-- Are you okay?” he asked, a worried note in his voice.

“Fine,” Daken nodded, walking toward the bathroom.

“... Did you get in trouble because of me?” Zach asked, a few footsteps sounding on the floor. “Because of last night?”

“No,” Daken shook his head, pausing in the doorway and glancing back at him. “I got in trouble for some of my own shenanigans. But not a lot of trouble. It’s fine,” he said. “Play your game, I’ll be back in a minute.”
“... Okay,” Zach nodded, looking not entirely convinced.

Daken pulled the bathroom door shut and stripped off his shirt. It had been stupid to try intimidating Pryde with pheromones, not least of all because it didn’t work, or because he was using his powers against an ally exactly like he’d given Zach detention for only yesterday, but also because the lingering residue would make Zach anxious. He pulled a washcloth out of the cabinet and turned on the sink, setting about the task of washing that clinging mistake off of his skin.

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Halfway through his hasty journey down city streets, racing the treacherously cooling paper bag in his hands, doubt and self-consciousness started assaulting Bobby. Would Daken even eat street-food? Bobby was just offering up a new opportunity for ridicule, wasn’t he? ‘This fell off a truck? Ew.’ Well, last night had proved that he was bound and determined to embarrass himself at every turn, so there was no going back anyway.

He took the final leg through the park at a jog and was scrambling up the main stairs and toward the staff dorms just after six, ignoring everything around him and intent on the finish-line. Bobby skidded to a stop just in front of Daken’s door and went still for a few seconds, not breathing, before bracing himself and knocking firmly. “... Hi. It’s Bobby... I’m not drunk,” he called, staring at the dark wood veneer that disguised a bulletproof core, like every other door in the school.

After an eternity, the door opened and Daken considered him. “Is that now the pre-qualifier to any future conversation?” he asked.

“... Maybe,” Bobby said and bit his lip for a moment. “Have you... eaten yet?”

Daken was silent for a moment, gaze shifting down and to the side, his thick eyelashes shading his eyes like black lace curtains, letting tiny suggestions of blue peak through.

“It’s- It’s okay if you’ve got something else-- I mean, don’t feel-- No pressure, I just--” Bobby floundered, a knot in his gut at the indecipherable hesitation.

“No pressure? Do you think I can’t smell kebabs?” Daken murmured.

“That’s- That’s fine. Yeah, I mean, I maybe jumped the gun a little bit. No big deal though. It’s gonna get eaten sometime,” Bobby said lamely.

“... My little brother was murdered,” Daken said softly, still looking away. “His murderer has been in the wind for several months, because the only time I actually managed to actually track it down, the shorter, louder version of you and his friends beat and burned me, allowing the creature to escape.”

Bobby opened and closed his mouth dumbly, having no idea what to do with that.

Daken closed his eyes. “Today Pryde has informed me that though we may finally be able to catch it again, the symbiotes need ‘closure’ more than me... Has she spent too much time in space, or am I selfish and racist for wanting to prioritize my needs over an alien civilization’s?”

Bobby was quiet for a moment, trying to decide how to respond, or even if he should. “... Do you think it, or do you feel it?” he finally asked.

Daken pursed his lips for a moment, opening his eyes but not looking at anything. “... ‘Feel’, I suppose. It’s not rational or reasonable, I can recognize that.”
“Then it’s not racist. It’s just hurt… You have a right to feel hurt when something horrible happens,” Bobby said.

Daken nodded slowly. “... I don’t think I want company tonight,” he said quietly. “... It hasn’t been a ‘long’ day, not chronologically, but I’ve had to be ‘on’ too much.” He sighed, tilting back his head. “I just got Zach out of here a half hour ago. He’s very upset that he’s required to make friends and have fun… Being patient is tiring.”

“Yeah, it definitely is. It seems like you’re a lot better at being patient than me though,” Bobby agreed, nodding.

“... I just want to take a long bath and go to bed,” Daken said quietly.

“That’s fine… Which sounds better, beef bhaji tacos, or chicken kati rolls?”

A hint of distress and annoyance flickered across Daken’s face, he didn’t look back at Bobby. “I’m really not--”

“So you don’t have to go to the cafeteria. Or out. Just-- They’re here, and they’re still warmish. Take your pick, and then I’ll get out of your hair,” Bobby quickly interjected.

Daken’s expression relaxed into blank tiredness and his eyes turned to look at Bobby. He was motionless and quiet for a moment, and then took a step out, toward Bobby, and another brought him very definitely into personal-space invasion territory. He hooked an arm loosely around Bobby’s waist and pulled their bodies close together, tucking his face down against the nook of Bobby’s neck and shoulder. Bobby stayed very still, at first startled, then afraid of breaking some spell. He was baffled when Daken, normally such a ninja-silent person in general, drew an oddly loudish and very deep breath through his mouth. He held it a moment, and Bobby felt a nose and lips lightly nuzzling his neck, then hot breath fanning out across his skin as Daken exhaled in a long sigh. Bobby shivered; that wasn’t something he did very often.

Daken lifted his head, faded back a few inches, then leaned his forehead against Bobby’s. His eyes were closed; Bobby let his fall shut too, too close this way to focus on anything and wanting to just absorb this moment. “Thank you,” Daken breathed.

“... Did I do something right this time?” Bobby whispered.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” Daken replied. He drew back, the place where his forehead had been touching Bobby’s feeling cool in an unpleasantly lonely way, and then a few seconds later, lips were very softly touching Bobby’s.

Bobby held perfectly still, not daring to move. It ended too quickly. However long it could have gone, that would have been too quick. Daken took a step away, the arm that had pressed against the small of Bobby’s back disappearing, and Bobby fought against the urge to pull him back in. He swallowed, blinked his eyes open and didn’t quite meet Daken’s. “... You’re…” Bobby wasn’t sure what he’d intended to say there. “... Um… I… Did you want the beef or the chicken?” he asked lamely. Then he flustered, and fluster turned to mild panic. “Do you want both? You can have both.”

Daken gave a small, tired smirk. “Beef,” he said.

“S-Sure,” Bobby fumbled, pulling the paper bag open and digging in it for a warm, foil-wrapped bundle and some napkins. “Here… Enjoy.” He held it out, feeling stupid and clumsy as he did.

“Thank you,” Daken said again as he accepted the offering.
“No problem,” Bobby chirped, rolling the top of the back closed and taking a backward step. “So, um, g-good night. I- I hope you get some rest and- and stuff.” Stupid.

“Well, now I don’t have to go out,” Daken noted, nodding to the foil-wrapped street fare, his mouth making an effort to smile, but his eyes weren’t really in it. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Bobby nodded.

“... Good night,” Daken said quietly, stepping back over the threshold into his room. He paused and looked back into Bobby’s eyes for another long moment, before shutting the door.

Bobby let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. He felt simultaneously giddy and stupid. He’d gotten a kiss. He’d done something right. He’d gotten a kiss. He’d made Daken’s day maybe a little less difficult. He’d gotten a kiss. He’d made the right call and said the right things and Daken had appreciated it. And he’d gotten a kiss.

Bobby turned and walked toward his own room, letting the arm that ended in a bag of zesty chicken-wrap swing pendulously at his side. The ghost of Daken’s lips lingered as he found his way back into the sanctuary of his dorm. He dropped the paper bag on the coffee table without breaking stride and continued back to the bedroom. He could microwave the kati rolls later; with this tiny triumph and the sensations of Daken’s touch so fresh in his mind, minor concerns like basic sustenance seemed too abstract to be bothered with.

Finding that he hadn’t made his bed that morning, Bobby shoved the disarrayed covers impatiently out of the way and let himself collapse onto the mattress. He closed his eyes, unbuckling his belt and focusing all his will on crystallizing that sensation of Daken’s lips in his memory for all times, then went on to recall the heat of his breath against Bobby’s neck as he opened his fly.
Bellona's first princess day

Bellona stared at the rotatable display of small, colored bottles, feeling both underwhelmed and overwhelmed. She turned her gaze to where Gabby was sitting on her knees in an oddly shaped chair, going through a cardboard, binder-like book. Daken glanced up and met her eyes; he smirked and waved her to come over, so Bellona abandoned the rack and walked up to look over Gabby’s shoulder.

“I find the sample-books a bit more accessible than the bottles, and certainly more organized,” Daken said.

“... I don’t know what...” Bellona started and then sighed in frustration. “Gabby, what color do you want me to get?”

Gabby looked up with a wrinkle between her brows. “You don’t like any of them?” she asked.

“I just-- I don’t know how to make this decision,” Bellona said, shaking her head.

“Hm, okay, maybeee...” Gabby started, turning back to the book.

Daken reached out and tapped the top of her hand. When Gabby looked up at him, he shook his head, then turned back to Bellona. “Relax. It’s not a decision that’s going to affect the course of your life, Bellona. It’ll last for about two weeks before it starts to chip if you leave it be, or if you want it off sooner, we can come back and they have tools to peel the gels off here,” Daken said calmly. “Pick a color that seems pretty or fun, or just pick one at random. You can close your eyes and point.”

Bellona pursed her lips, frustrated and now annoyed. She didn’t understand why Daken wanted her to make a decision when Gabby could easily pick something for her. She looked down at the book again, and her eyes lighted on one of the nail samples that was a close approximation to the color of Gabby’s eyes. Bellona leaned over and tapped it with a finger. “That one.”

“Perfect,” Daken said, giving her a smile.

“I’m gonna get pearly-purple,” Gabby said, flipping the cardboard page over and pointing out another sample. “What are you getting, Daken?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Mm... black?”

“Noooo!” Gabby protested. “That’s so boring!”

“How about prismatic dress-blue?” Daken said, pointing to a sample that was nearly black, but filled with miniscule silver and iridescent sparkles.

“Weeeell... okay,” Gabby agreed reluctantly. “But next time you have to get a real color.”

“Black is a real color. It’s neutral. It can go with any outfit,” Daken said.

“Black is the absence of color,” Bellona corrected. “Black is a surface failing to reflect light waves.”
“And yet, it requires an exceptional amount of pigment to make things black,” Daken rebutted, grinning.

“Hey, Kitty?” The inquiry came accompanied by a soft knock.

Kitty glanced up, raising an eyebrow. “It’s generally accepted that you’re supposed to knock on the outside of the door,” she pointed out, watching Bobby take that as invitation and walk in.

“Just because something’s generally accepted doesn’t mean it’s true or right,” Bobby shot back.

“Wow. That rejoinder is completely out of this argument’s weight class,” Kitty rolled her eyes.

“That means I win, right?”

“Well, you’re already inside, so I guess you did,” Kitty leaned her cheek against one hand. “What’s up?”

“Well, for starters, I should point out that it’s Sunday, and if you have that much work, then you need to improve your ability to delegate,” Bobby said, and then sat down in the chair facing her desk. “Also, what’s the story with the alien-Jimmy-kid thing?”

Kitty sighed, squeezing her eyes shut for a moment. “You’ve been talking to Daken?”

“A little bit? Not enough to have a sense of what’s going on, other than it makes him angsty?” Bobby shrugged.

“Reed Richards is going to try and use his extra-super-brain to come up with a way to find Jimmy, or if the poison really did hollow him out, then... whatever’s left,” Kitty explained tiredly. “A friend of mine has agreed to figure out getting him-or-it into a spaceship.”

“‘It’?” Bobby raised an eyebrow at her.

“I’m not going to personize a parasite that puppets and/or murders two hosts simultaneously and gives no shits,” Kitty retorted.

“Fair enough. So... we want to put it in a spaceship to pack it off as a gift to the symbiote-guys? Are those guys not super-asshole-aliens?” Bobby asked, frowning at her.

“No. They’re not. They’re regularly and extensively victimized aliens. Because the real asshole-aliens look at them and see tools and weapons,” Kitty explained. “Their homeworld gets raided, a lot, by assholes who want to kidnap and sell a lot of the baby ones that are too young to know they’re being abused.”

“Wow, that’s... That is way darker than... Wow,” Bobby said, looking horrified.

“Yeah,” Kitty sighed again, shaking her head. “So I have a friend who knows their planet and their culture, he’s got some kind of title with them, and he says he’s got a posse that can probably handle catching and transporting the poison-thing if Reed figures out a way to track it.”

“Okay but... why are we sending the poison-thing to the symbiote-guys?” Bobby asked. “Like, why would they want one?”

“So they can put it on trial,” Kitty said. “I mean, I didn’t really ask, I haven’t spoken to any of them, but I know they have some kind of justice system, and having a trial seemed like...”
“Is this… a Nuremberg thing?” Bobby asked quietly.

“It’s closure, Bobby. Trials mean closure,” Kitty said firmly.

“Okay,” Bobby said, looking down at the top of her desk.

“I know Daken’s upset about this, but I think he understands that it’s important.” Kitty ran a hand over her hair and slumped back in her chair. “I mean, I assume that if he stops arguing, it means he gets that it’s important.”

“That seems likely,” Bobby agreed, nodding slightly.

“And… if maybe the kid inside it isn’t as dead as advertised?” Kitty sighed and shook her head. “Daken is convinced. He’s going to shoot first… So I want this looked at by people who are more objective and might have the tools to sort out if there’s other possibilities.”

“That… That would be awesome. Do you think it might… Did you tell Daken that, and he’s just being stubborn-angsty anyway?” Bobby asked, frowning.

“Bobby, I have no idea if it’s a realistic possibility,” Kitty said seriously. “I don’t think it’s one we should dismiss, but… no, I didn’t say any of that to Daken, because there’s no reason he should have to mourn twice if it’s really just as bad as we’ve heard.”

“… Right. Yeah. I see your point,” Bobby nodded, looking down at the desk with a worried brow.

Bellona had gotten twitchy to the point it was likely that somebody might lose a hand during the final stages of their time at the salon. She’d finally left the chair when Daken suggested that maybe she forego makeup, and she now sat agitatedly at his side while they waited for the beautician to finish Gabby’s.

“Did it make you nervous, were you worried about things getting too close to your eyes?” Daken asked, sliding his hand gently around hers as he laid down calming pheromones.

“… She was touching my face,” Bellona said, looking down and away. “I don’t know her. I don’t like strangers touching me… It was okay when it was just my hands, and- and… I don’t think I really liked the hair, but when she started touching my face…”

“It’s okay. That’s perfectly reasonable,” Daken said, squeezing her hand gently before letting her go. “I’m sorry, I should have checked in more.”

“N-No, it’s… Gabby was so happy. I messed it up,” Bellona said miserably, shaking her head.

“Gabby’s still happy,” Daken pointed out, nodding to where Gabby was sitting in a chair, cheerfully chattering with her beautician. “And you’re not going to be kicked out of the tea house for not being in full makeup.”

Bellona sighed unhappily, touching her own hand to her face and looking up at the posters of models on the walls.

“Would you want to try it sometime without the strangers?” Daken asked, and Bellona turned back to him with a confused pinch to her brow. “Makeup? If you don’t like the salon experience, I could show you some options. Or teach you how to do it yourself, if you like.”
“... You can do... that?” Bellona asked uncertainly, pointing vaguely at one of the near posters.

“Oh I can do better than that,” Daken replied with a smirk. “Something to think about before hand, so that I can be sure to purchase the correct makeup to do things right, is whether you would want to conceal your scars or own them. And once that’s decided, we can play around with the fun parts.”

“What are the fun parts?”

“The eyes,” Daken said. “Choosing a lip-color and sheen can be engaging, and your age-demographic has been doing some rather delightful, although I suspect very fragile, looks in their youtube videos. But the eyes have far and away the most potential.”

Bellona considered him with curious interest. “What about my eyes? What would makeup look like for mine?”

“Well that depends.” Daken grinned, reaching up and running his thumb along the underside of her jaw and tilting his head as he made a show of examining her. “On whether we’d be going for subtle, bold, or theatrical.”

Bellona looked down with an embarrassed air, but she seemed pleased. “For... another princess-day?” she asked.

“Sure. Next time we could do the makeup at home. Gabby probably wouldn’t mind,” Daken agreed with a nod. “I’m no manicurist, and I don’t have the UV set-up for it, but I know how to paint a face. I could put up your hair too.”

“What about...” Bellona trailed off and then bit her lip.

“Yes?”

She shook her head. “It’s not important.”

“Bellona,” Daken caught her hand again and lifted it, wrapping it in both of his own. “What is it?”

“... Could... Could it sometime be you and I... without Gabby... or anyone else?” Bellona whispered, and then distress flashed across her face and guilt colored her scent.

“Of course,” Daken said, upping his pheromones again to soothe her and pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Just you and me.”

Bellona slumped a little in relief. “Really?”

“Friday evening Zach will be going on a movie outing with his classmates, and he’ll be occupied by detention before that,” Daken said with perfect casualness to reassure Bellona that she hadn’t asked anything strange. “I’ll be done running my classes by two. That gives us a fair bit of time to work with.”

“Okay,” Bellona nodded.

“Is there anything particular you had in mind to do?”

She shrugged, finally looking back up at him.

“Do you want to go out, or stay in?” Daken asked.
“In,” Bellona decided.

“All right. It sounds like a perfect opportunity to get to know each other better,” Daken said, squeezing her hand and smiling at her.

Hesitantly, her lips curled up a little into the first tiny smile he’d seen on them.

…”Bonjour-hi.”

Bobby made a face somewhere between a grimace and a smirk. Jean-Paul had been doing this for a year, but it would never stop sounding weird. “Still being a subversive element, huh?”

“The legislature does not govern my mouth,” Jean-Paul replied. “How was your week?”

“A freaking roller-coaster,” Bobby chuckled, shaking his head, and then leaning it back against the wall of a half-igloo he’d built himself to ward off the afternoon heat as he lounged on the main building’s roof.

“Sounds unpleasant,” Jean-Paul noted. “The legislature does not govern my mouth,” Jean-Paul replied. “How was your week?”

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“A freaking roller-coaster,” Bobby chuckled, shaking his head, and then leaning it back against the wall of a half-igloo he’d built himself to ward off the afternoon heat as he lounged on the main building’s roof.

“Sounds unpleasant,” Jean-Paul noted. “That wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain video that went viral Thursday night, would it?”

“Well, the screaming, arm-flailing drop did,” Bobby agreed. “That was supposed to be my dinner-date. I had Thursday reserved. It was in Google calendars and everything.”

“Well that poacher,” Jean-Paul said with as much sympathy in his tone as sardonicism. “Internet speculation seems to be split about fifty-fifty on whether or not Johnny Storm is officially dating ‘Hammerine’.”

“He’s not,” Bobby said. “Apparently they’ve had a really unhealthy on-again-off-again for a few years. They’re theoretically permanently ‘off’ now.”

“Sounds like one less annoying complication... When you say you had Thursday ‘reserved’, was that a plan in your own head, or...”

“No, he agreed to dinner!” Bobby said with a flutter in his chest. “Actually, he suggested dinner. And- And everything’s been crazy for the last couple days and I may have gotten drunk and made a fool of myself a little bit (or a lot) and last night I thought maybe I could skip a complication-level if I showed up at his door with takeout (and just as I’m saying that I’m realizing that’s not necessarily a truish assumption) but he was having a bad day for some unrelated reasons and he said he wasn’t up for company but I was like-- I said I’d leave him alone, but I already bought him a sandwich so maybe he should just keep it so he wouldn’t have to deal with the cafeteria or anything and apparently that was a not-wrong-answer and so we skipped the date but I still got a goodnight-kiss out of it.”

Jean-Paul was quiet for a few seconds. “If I weren’t a speedster, I might have had trouble tracking that word-vomit,” he noted. “So the relevant bit seems to be that you got a kiss?”

“So relevant,” Bobby agreed.

Jean-Paul chuckled. “This is my new soap-opera. I think you need to start broadcasting daily episodes, I want more excruciating detail than once a week is getting me.”

“If I’m giddy like an idiot and totally unreasonably turned on by a tongue-free kiss, that’s not
crush-territory, is it?” Bobby asked, staring out at a wispy little cloud hanging low in the sky. “Like, I’m in deep, right?”

“Well, that’s not in any way categorical, but it could be a possible symptom,” Jean-Paul said. “It definitely sounds like you’re excited though, and that’s great. Be excited. Have fun.”

Bobby’s heart sank a little. “No. That’s not great… I can’t-- I can’t be an idiot like that again.”

“It’s not like you’re talking about uprooting and moving across the country this time, so--”

“No, I mean, for him,” Bobby shook his head and sighed, pulling his knees up close to him. “The very tiny handful of people who know Daken well all seem to be telling me that insincere casual dating would be a really really bad idea with him.”

“Bobby, you’re not insincere,” Jean-Paul said. “You have to get to know him better to figure out how deep you’re in it. Dinner is how you’re going to get to know him better.”

Bobby bit his lip for a moment and stared at the edge of the roof. “... I don’t want to find out it’s just a crush,” he said quietly.

“So are you just going to close your eyes and run away?” Jean-Paul retorted.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Bobby shrugged helplessly.

“Then you’re an idiot.”

“I’m probably an idiot either way.”

“No. Only if you give this up without trying,” Jean-Paul snapped, getting sharper and a little louder. “Yes, it’s very sad that life isn’t a Disney movie, but if you allow that to paralyze you, then you’re going to spend your life miserable.”

Bobby sighed again. “Right now my life is more like ‘Ten Things I Hate About You’.”

“That’s a terrible movie, Bobby.”


“It’s a terrible adaptation of what might have been a decent play were it to have been correctly-labeled,” Jean-Paul scoffed. “Why anyone thinks that ‘Taming of the Shrew’ is a comedy or a romance instead of the early example of psychological-horror that it clearly was is beyond me.”

Bobby stared at the shingles for a minute and grinned. “Y’know, that really sounds like something Daken would probably say.”

“Well then your taste in men is far better than your taste in movies.”

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“How was princess day?” Laura asked, a smile tugging at one corner of her lips.

“So good!” Gabby exclaimed. Her bright eyes were accented with liner and pink shimmer eyeshadow, and she was wearing a pair of silver and crystal barrettes that Laura hoped were only costume-jewelry. She’d gotten Daken to verbally agree to a ten dollar limit on impromptu gifts, but wasn’t yet entirely confident he wouldn’t try to cheat.
“I’m always dubious about online reviews, but the ones for this tea house were accurate,” Daken noted, his face was makeup-free this time, but he was wearing a set of clothes Laura hadn’t seen before and suspected were expensive. “None of the furniture was younger than a hundred years, the staff were all dressed in period patterns-- although perhaps a bit fancier than ‘the help’ really would have worn in those days-- and the food and tea were more than adequate in flavor and presentation.”

“I hope you got your fill of presentation then. Dinner’s in paper cartons,” Laura warned, taking a back-step into the apartment so her siblings could make their way in.

“The best part of dressup is getting undignified in your regalia afterwards,” Daken replied cheerfully. “I intend to sit on the floor.”

“Did you like it?” Laura asked in a quieter voice as Bellona passed her. “I see you skipped the makeup.”

“I don’t like strangers touching my face,” Bellona said, looking down.

“Valid,” Laura agreed. “All of it makes me uncomfortable. I don’t enjoy ‘dress up’... It’s alright if you like it, but you don’t have to. Gabby won’t be mad.”

Bellona shrugged. “I’m not sure. I haven’t decided.”

Laura nodded. “There’s no deadline. And you can always change your mind later.”

Bellona pursed her lips for a moment, looking down. “... Thank you,” she said, as Gabby’s voice started calling impatiently for their presence in the living room.

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Bobby stopped in front of Daken’s door and braced himself. Shoring up courage was easier tonight than it had been yesterday, and with a deep breath, he knocked. “It’s Bobby,” he called. He stood still, waiting as a few minutes passed. He bit his lip, debating whether persistence was to be considered an annoyingly aggressive trait or an endearing one. He knocked again. “I’m not drunk?”

A few more minutes slipped away. Bobby pushed back the panicked little voice in his head that insisted Daken was ignoring him because Bobby had done something wrong again. That was stupid. He just wasn’t inside. It’s not like they’d made plans. Daken was just somewhere else doing something else. Bobby chewed on his lip for another minute before turning and walking down the hall with all the casualness he could muster.

He reached the staff lounge and peeked in to find Rachel, Monet and Dani playing cheat-Doug-at-Scrabble, something nobody had actually done yet, but attempting it had none the less become a favorite game of late.

“No it’s not!” Doug was insisting.

“It’s Basque,” Monet said, wearing a perfect poker-face while Rachel and Dani were trying hard to keep their amusement restrained.

“No it’s not!”

“Maybe it’s Basque slang,” Bobby suggested, walking in. “Like, it’s not traditionally a word, but all the kids are saying it. Linguistic evolution.”
“It’s what the Basque kids call mouth-breathers who wear white socks with black slacks,” Monet elaborated, jumping on Bobby’s suggestion as Dani lost her battle and started giggling.

“No it’s not!”

“Hey, speaking of the cool-kids club, any of you ladies know where Daken is tonight?” Bobby asked unsmoothly.

The girls all turned and looked at Bobby with expressions ranging from intrigued to appraising to downright leering, while Doug picked up the tiles Monet had apparently just laid down and started tossing them across the table at her one by one. “It’s Bellona’s first princess day.” Rachel said, which was probably meant to hold some kind of meaning. “She and Daken were probably staying for dinner while they bring Gabby home.”

“Princes day?” Bobby asked, tilting his head to the side and giving Rachel a baffled look.

“Make-overs and a fancy tea party,” Dani explained, leaning her elbows on the table and grinning. “Why aren’t you following Gabby’s blog? You should be. It’s hilarious and adorable.”

“That sounds adorable and I have no idea why I’m not following Gabby’s blog. I have made bad life choices,” Bobby agreed. Then he shifted awkwardly, feeling uncomfortable under Rachel and Dani’s continued scrutiny, while Monet was distracted by trying to retrieve a scrabble-tile that had gone down her shirt. “So, anyway… I’ll… go exist somewhere else now.”

“Perhaps instead of relying on some contrived ‘I was in the neighborhood’ pretense, you simply ask ahead of time whether Daken could possibly be convinced to spend an evening with you?” Monet drawled, her attempt to maintain condescending dignity somewhat hampered by having a hand stuck down her collar.

“Tried that. Then the stupid flair happened and Johnny preempted me,” Bobby groaned. “I kind of feel like in this super-lifestyle, all plans are just an invitation for some kind of surprise disaster.”

“Wow, defeatist. Well maybe you should awkwardly hang around his locker between classes or stick a not-so-secret admirer valentine through the slats,” Rachel said.

“Oh, a home-made one. Construction paper heart, maybe some clumsy, amateur poetry,” Dani added.

“I like it.” Rachel grinned.

“You guys are jerks. I need you to know that. You’re jerks,” Bobby announced with an over-dramatic sigh as he retreated for the door.

“Bobby, Bobby, use pink construction paper, not red! You don’t want to come on too strong!” Dani called after him.

Chapter End Notes

So the ‘Bonjour-hi’ thing, that became a normal informal greeting in Quebec, especially Montreal, over a recent while, and then in 2017, the Quebec legislature passed official legislation that people shouldn’t be saying it. And, well, there’s two major-ass problems with this. The first is that they think they can and should be
policing how people say hello to each other, and what. the. fuck. to that, except that the pseudo-law can't actually be enforced and they never intended to enforce it. Which brings us to the second problem: they spent tax-payer dollars to write this law, vote on it, and 'implement' it (I put implement in quotes, because the only implementation was announcing that they'd passed it). I feel like 'bonjour-hi' is a phrase Jean-Paul never used before the legislation was passed, but afterwards he was like "I AM OFFENDED" and started using it twenty times a day in protest.

10 Things I Hate About You may not have withstood the ravages of time very well, but for kids in the 90s a lot of it was actually a really good satire on the pop-culture and counter-culture of the era. I remember last year talking to someone who wasn't yet alive when that movie came out and had just seen it for the first time, and she was really upset about the portrayal of feminism in it, and I was kind of like "uh, actually, that was really apt for what was going on at that time." But also, if you're not familiar with the plot of the Shakespeare play it borrowed it's opening premise from (and very little else) Taming of the Shrew is so incredibly fucked-up, you guys! In 10 Things, they had the duplicitous plan being to trick a girl into falling in like with a boy and going to prom. In Shrew the female protagonist is married off against her will to a man who says that he will 'tame' her, and what this entails is imprisoning her, starving her and torturing her until she is rendered docile and obedient. THIS WAS BILLED AS A ROM-COM, YOU GUYS! But the ending scenes and monologues make me think that Shakespeare was aware of how fucked up it was, and was trying to satirize and comment on the problematic notion of 'female obedience', but then his audience completely missed the point and thought he was playing it straight... So... Eugh.
Daken is worried about loose threads.

The temperature had climbed to thirty-five while Daken was running his strength and balance class on the lawn, and it hadn’t yet reached its crescendo. He’d put more distance between himself and his students in the second half, walking the perimeter and giving only verbal corrections as he felt the sweat building on his skin. There was a chance he might have to move his classes into the danger room for the summer. He hated the thought though; he disliked encouraging the students to isolate themselves in a virtual reality over interacting with the one outside. But working closely with hale teenagers, scaling into their prime years of inquisitive prurience, while he was sweating like this held a discomfort; there was a philosophical question of whether by doing so he was inviting their fascination, and that possibility, even as a passive uncertainty, was too problematic to ignore.

Daken made his way through the foyer at a brisk clip, heading up the stairs toward the staff dorms, and was sufficiently distracted by his thoughts that he got halfway down the hall before looking up and faltering as he noticed Drake leaned against the wall next to his door. He offered Daken a small smile with a nervous edge to it. “Hey,” he said, as Daken’s pace slowed and then halted. “What are you doing for lunch?”

Daken stared at him for a few seconds, a numb feeling blanketing him, and then pointed at the door to his suite, eyes locked with Drake’s. “Shower,” he said quietly.

“R-Right. Um, but after that?” Drake asked.

Daken bit his lip for a moment, anxiety taking root and rising in his throat like bile. “... I’m in the middle of an important philosophical debate,” he said. “Is it irresponsible to interact with teenagers in situations wherein my powers are more difficult to control?”

“You mean…” Drake faltered, and when Daken glanced back up at him again, his brow was pinched slightly and he was looking Daken over, taking in the sheen on him. “You mean because it’s hot?”

“Yes,” Daken nodded.

“That’s… I mean… I don’t know,” Drake said, a small frown on his lips. “Students have crushed on me a few times. When I was the youngest teacher, it just kind of went with the territory. And, I mean, it’s not morally reprehensible to be pretty.”

“I assume you didn’t actively encourage them though,” Daken said quietly.

“No, but you’re not either, right?” Drake offered a shrug.

“I only have so much control over what my autonomic functions do.” Daken shook his head and sighed. “I need to fret a while… Maybe we can do this later?”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll- I’ll catch you later,” Drake said, trying without success to disguise a disappointed tone.
“You’ll only catch me if I let you,” Daken replied, hesitating for a second and then walking to his door, despite the fact that it brought him less than a meter from Drake while Daken was dragging an aura of pungent influence with him.

“Heh. Yeah. Obviously,” Drake agreed with a hint of fluster as Daken heard his pulse start to speed up. “So, um…”

“You don’t have to come up with a clever closing,” Daken said softly. “Closings aren’t very important in light of the fact that we’ll just be seeing each other again and again.”

“... Yeah…” Drake breathed, unconsciously leaning slightly in Daken’s direction, his heart pumping still faster.

Daken opened his mouth, for a moment meaning to suggest Drake ought to go take a cold shower himself, but thought better of it and quietly said, “Later.” He pushed his door open and stepped inside; lingering was pointless. He closed the door behind him and paused, biting his lip. Drake’s quickened pulse and rising headiness was too affecting. He was becoming increasingly hard to ignore. And so was every little problematic detail in their brief history thus far.

Daken blew a harsh breath through his teeth and walked quickly for the bathroom. He cast his clothes carelessly to the tile floor and climbed into the bathtub, turning on the shower and then sinking down. He settled on the floor of the tub, pulling his knees up and hugging them to him as cold water fell on his head. His gaze was unfocused and the water became a hypnotic rhythm as he introspected. There were too many loose threads still. In only two brief encounters with Drake the previous year, neither lasting a full hour, the two of them had managed to create so very much baggage. And Daken forgiving Drake for what he’d done, and vice versa, didn’t simply relieve all of it. There were still too many loose threads. Not the least of which was Zach’s fear of Drake.

He closed his eyes and wondered if Drake even understood how much the first few impressions he’d made on Zach had terrified him. But Zach wasn’t the only one to be terrorized by that absolute mess. Did the man Daken had stabbed know he’d been given sanctuary at the school? Had Drake told him? Had they even spoken to each other after going their separate ways? And even if he knew about the sanctuary, Daken supremely doubted he knew that Drake was bringing him takeout dinners or asking about his lunch plans. Daken licked his lips and tilted his face up toward the spray of the shower. He knew this was the sort of wound that would turn septic if ignored. And maybe it already was, but letting it fester longer would only make it worse.

888

Bobby was staring in the mirror, scrutinizing for any imperfections in his carefully crafted ‘careless messy’ hair, and trying to psyche himself up. This time was the time. This time there was going to be dinner. Together. Him and Daken. There would be food and conversation, and no emergencies would get in the way. And hopefully no furious, over-protective teenagers would get in the way either. Would it be an abuse of his senior staff power to check the school’s security net for Zach’s twenty? Probably.

He was just plastering over his fear of another Zach-tantrum when a knock sounded on the door out in the front room. “It’s Daken,” a familiar voice called over the speaker. Bobby stared at his reflection, mind blank for a moment, before a nauseating mix of panic and excitement surged through his guts, and he pushed himself away from the counter. He’d been about to go knock on Daken’s door, and here he just was, tables turned.

Bobby hurried through the front room feeling weirdly clumsy, but didn’t actually stumble. He opened the door and then opened his mouth. And then had no idea what he’d meant to say. After a
few excruciating seconds, he pushed out, “Hi.”

“I’d like to ask you for a phone number,” Daken said.

Bobby tilted his head and grinned. “That’s really cute, but you already have it,” he noted.

“Not yours,” Daken replied. “Judah’s.”

Bobby stared at him dumbly for a moment. “... Why?”

“I owe him an apology,” Daken said, gaze flickering downward. “Sure as I am that he’s going to live a great deal longer well away from people like us, I was still rude.”

“... Stabbing him was ‘rude’?” Bobby asked incredulously.

Daken’s brow pinched and he looked uncertain. “Very rude?” he asked, hesitantly looking up.

“... Are you just messing with me right now?”

“Only partially.” Daken’s lips quirked up a little and he shook his head. “I’m serious about the apology.”

“Okay, um…” Bobby looked down for a minute, mind racing and drawing a blank at the same time, trying to process the really really unexpected request. “... Daken, I-- Speaking of ‘rude’ things to do, we’re talking about someone you maimed, and I don’t think it would be one hundred percent fine for me to just give you his contact information without, y’know, talking to him first and explaining the situation and asking if it’s okay…”

“That seems completely reasonable,” Daken nodded. He did not, however, go on to add a ‘never mind’ or ‘forget about it’. Fuck.

“So… I should… probably call him… and ask if that’s okay…” Bobby concluded reluctantly.

“I’d appreciate it,” Daken said, eyes demuring again. “You don’t have to do it right this second, of course. I’m not trying to inconvenience you. Just, when you talk to him next.”

“Yeah. Sure. It’s… no problem,” Bobby said awkwardly, trying not to cringe. Because of course he chatted with his ex all the time. Well, given that Daken’s main frame of reference for Bobby’s exes was probably Lorna, it maybe wasn’t an unreasonable assumption for him to make.

“Thank you,” Daken said. “I’ll let you get back to your evening then.”

“I--” Bobby started and then bit his lips and swallowed as Daken gave him an expectant look. “I’ll see you later,” Bobby finished lamely.

Daken nodded and gave him a little smile that was more cut-and-paste than anything with an emotion behind it; then he turned and walked away down the hall.

Bobby stepped back into his living room, leaned against the back of the door once he’d closed it, and groaned. This was absolutely not the evening he’d wanted. But an annoying voice inside him was insisting that it was absolutely what he had to do. ASAP. Tonight. The prospect of talking to Judah in any capacity was like the prospect of oral surgery. Talking to him about Daken? That was a nightmare. Maybe this was actually just a nightmare? No, Bobby couldn’t be so lucky.

It was still too early to call though, right? It wouldn’t quite be three on the west coast. Still deep in the work day. Except that rationalizing fell apart under the fact that Judah was a freelancer and
didn’t abide by standard office hours. Bobby closed his eyes and bit down hard on his lip. He
didn’t want to do this. He had to do this. Daken deciding to apologize was kind of a big deal,
wasn’t it? Bobby wondered if Terry and some those-you’ve-wronged therapy thing was behind it.
Bobby couldn’t thwart Daken trying to make such a huge ‘progress’ thing just because it was
uncomfortable for him. Besides, he should be doing it anyway. He should have done it a long time
ago.

He pushed away from the door and walked over to the couch, dropping himself heavily into it.
After a minute, he kicked off his shoes and turned sideways, leaning against the armrest and
putting his feet up on the cushions as he pulled out his phone. He opened his contact list and stared
at Judah’s entry for an indefinable length of time, mustering every drop of courage he could find,
before finally pressing ‘call’.

The line rang twice before finally picking up. “Hi Bobby,” Judah’s voice answered with what
might have been a hesitantly subdued quality.

“… Hi… Um,” Bobby faltered. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I owe you
an apology… I’ve owed you an apology for a while, but I’m kind of a coward about that sort of
thing and prefer to cover it with excuses and pretend that I’m the star of every opera.”

“Bobby, you don’t have to--”

“Yeah, I really do,” Bobby cut him off. “I snapped at you, and I was really bitchy, and you didn’t
deserve it… You have every right to not be in constant fear for your life and… and I put you in that
position in a lot of different ways.”

“I get that hero-types are big on persecuting themselves, but it’s not like you just failed to mention
‘oh by the way, dating a superhero is dangerous’, ” Judah said. “I watched you fight a sentinel.
That should have registered as an objectively scary thing, and the fact that I decided it was ‘hot’ is
on me and my reality-disconnect, not you.”

“So, I mean, yeah, that might have been a warning flag, but I also maybe should have tried talking
to you specifically about the life-threatening quality of my lifestyle, or mentioned that around fifty
people associated with the X-Men in some way have been murdered just on Xavier School property
alone,” Bobby said with his nervous buzz dropping way too quickly into the post-adrenaline
nauseous kind of anxiety. “And… that’s glossing the fact that what happened to you was
something I started.”

“No. Stop that. You didn’t stab me,” Judah retorted.

“No, I just stabbed the guy who decided to pull a proxy-revenge on me,” Bobby said with a slight
groan. “Judah, he wasn’t just mad because he was crazy. I mean, he actually was legitimately sick
at the time, but… I put about two gallons of his blood on the floor a couple months earlier, and
then just… left him like that.”

Judah was silent for what felt like a long time. “So… that- that happened during a fight that went
wrong?” he finally asked.

“… You know in cartoons when the big thug puts his hand against the plucky kid’s forehead and
holds him off while the plucky kid swings his fists at the thug with no hope of ever making one
connect?”

“Okay…”
“I’m the thug,” Bobby said, feeling sicker as he said it. “Daken can take almost any normal person, hell, he can probably take ninety percent of super-persons, but I out-power him by a lot, and besides that, none of his attacks even work on me when I’m iced up.”

“And… what exactly does that have to do with putting two gallons of his blood on the floor?” Judah asked.

“… That dumping me was a good decision, but maybe it’s not my enemies you should have been afraid of…” Bobby said, his voice coming out pinched as his throat felt too tight.

“Bullshit. That’s… I mean, he was obviously fine. He showed up that night at the school looking like about the healthiest person I’d ever seen,” Judah protested.

“Yeah. Yeah. Healing from just about any beating is part of his mutation,” Bobby agreed, closing his eyes and trying to tell the nausea that his stomach was empty and it could go away now. “But he- he feels pain… And I knew that. I mean, nobody told me, but I had every reason to know it. Because I was told that the only reason his baby sister doesn’t is because of mad scientists doing mad science to her… I… Running into him caught me flat-footed, and I got freaked out and hit him a lot harder than I should have.”

There was quiet for a moment, ending in what Bobby imagined might be a frustrated sigh, but either the phone’s receiver or the cell network made it into weird sound-garbage. “So, you made him angry. And maybe being angry was a legitimate response. But the ‘I will destroy something you love’ is crazy-ass in a way I thought was reserved for super-villains in movies, but apparently those reflect reality more than I realized.”

“That’s… You know how I mentioned he was sick?”

“Sick in the head.”

“Yeah, actually. But not in any kind of normal or from-nature way,” Bobby said, and then bit his lip for a moment, trying to find the best articulation. “… You remember when he turned blue-gray and got a lot more extra? That’s because a couple years ago some really extra super-villains shoved a body-and-mind-altering control device called a deathseed (and I’m not actually completely sure if it’s tech or magic) inside of him, and then got themselves killed. So then, he was just running around with that control device still turned on but nobody behind the controls, and it was seriously fucking him up.” He stared at his socked feet. His chest felt tight with guilt; it wasn’t guilt derived from having actively hurt Daken now though. Inactive guilt didn’t have the shock-value punch of a moment, it had a creeping miasma slowly built to toxic levels over two years. “The X-Men who knew about it didn’t mention it to the rest of us, and I’m not sure we would have actually done anything about it if he hadn’t bothered us… Helping mutants who are being abused or are in trouble is supposed to be one of the X-Men’s primary jobs, but… I think maybe a lot of the time, we just don’t unless whatever’s being done to them is annoying us…”

“So now you’re taking responsibility for every mistake the X-Men, as a group, make?” Judah asked.

“No.” Bobby closed his eyes again, shaking his head. “What I did wrong was maim Daken within an inch of his life and play it off as not even a thing,” he said. “But, this stuff about the deathseed is— I’m just trying to explain to you what happened. Or, I mean, why. Daken was really sick, and we’d just let him be sick because we didn’t want to do anything about it… And now--”

“And now he’s in New York. Taking afternoon drives with Johnny Storm,” Judah said.
Shit shit shit shit shit. “So… You saw the video, huh?” Bobby mumbled lamely.

“Nooo. Of course I didn’t watch the video that thousands of people were tagging #IsJohnnyStormQueer,” Judah scoffed.

Bobby winced and bit his lip for a second. “... So, we-- the X-Men caught up to him about a month ago. Specifically, we rescued him from the latest creepy people that had kidnapped him to fuck with his head and turn him into a brainwashed puppet, which… happens to him a lot, actually…” he explained haltingly. “And, um, I wasn’t part of most of the meeting except for the part where I literally got called into the principal’s office to explain how I fucked up with the two-gallons-of-blood thing, and also how I… hadn’t told anybody about it.” He paused, clenching his teeth for a second and swallowing before pushing on. “But what shook out was that Daken’s now in a sheltered-workshop situation with mandatory therapy.”

There was another silence on the line as Judah either waited to make sure he was done or took a while to process it. “... Are you telling me he’s staying at the school?”

“Yeah.”

“The school that’s full of kids?”

“He’s-- You met him, for that matter I met him, when he was being made magically-or-technologically crazier than he would otherwise be,” Bobby explained. “He’s really different when it’s just him and the deathseed’s dormant. He’s really protective of the kids, like-- he got really worried about their moral, and we’d all kind of blind-spotted it because all of us who grew up with X-drama were just jaded to how fucked up it is for teenagers to contemplate their own mortality twenty times a day.”

“So you’re saying he’s not a threat to kids?”

“The other day Jubilee said that he’s her new parenting role-model,” Bobby sighed.

“Parenting?”

“... Zach’s mom forgot his birthday… and forgot to call or text or facebook him ever since he first came to the school,” Bobby said, leaning forward and grabbing the pillow from the other side of the couch. “So Daken apparently showed up on her doorstep and asked her to sign off on custody-papers or something. And she didn’t see any problem with that, sooo... not exactly mother-of-the-year.”

“And you don’t see a problem with it?” Judah demanded.

“I did. I kinda started to yell at him, but he shut me down with having a way more articulate argument than me.” Bobby stuffed the pillow between his back and the couch-arm he’d been leaning against, the overture to a backache having started to threaten him. “He shuts me down a lot... He’s better at talking than me... He’s better at talking than most politicians and movie stars are.”

“Well you certainly sound star-struck, so he must,” Judah quipped.

Shit shit shit shit shit. “... Do I?”

There was a long pause. Shit shit shit shit shit.

“He-He’s-- Sometimes I have trouble telling when believes what he’s saying or when he’s saying it
just for the shock-value. So that makes it kind of hard to figure out how to even argue with him,” Bobby floundered, trying to pretend the awkward falter hadn’t happened. “Or he’ll say something just to win an argument, but then say something completely different later. Like- Like two weeks ago when I asked him if he was sorry for stabbing you, and he was like ‘no because I want to piss you off’ or something, but now he wants to apologize to you. And I don’t know if that’s because he’s been doing his therapy like he’s supposed to and he’s had an epiphany, or if it’s because he really was just talking out of his ass before to ‘win’ or something.”

“He wants to apologize to me?”

“Yeah, and I wasn’t sure, I thought-- I thought I should ask if you’d even want that?” Bobby said, squirming a little bit. “I mean, would getting an apology make you feel a little bit better about that nightmare, or do you just never want to hear his voice or have anything to do with him ever again?”

“... So... you called me to ask for him if I’ll let him check off number eight on his little twelve-step?” Judah asked, voice acidic. Shit shit shit shit shit.

“I’ve owed you an apology for months,” Bobby said, trying hard to keep his voice steady. “I’ve owed you an apology the whole time, because getting mad at you for having some very basic drive for self-preservation was shitty. But I procrastinated because I was embarrassed, and I didn’t want to admit that to myself or anyone else. And yeah, Daken saying he wanted to apologize to you? It shamed me. That he was ready to apologize and I still hadn’t even let myself admit I’d been even a little bit in the wrong… Even when he’s not trying, he embarrasses the hell out of me, because he’s got a lot more excuses than me, but he doesn’t hide behind them.”

“That’s a dodge and it sounds like a ‘yes’,” Judah spat.

“If I said ‘no’ would you believe me, and if I said ‘yes’ would you decide that invalidates everything else I said?” Bobby asked, sickness and anxiety suddenly sparking into anger, which he tried to tamp back down.

“I don’t know, but I need an answer!” Judah exclaimed. “Bobby, did you fall in love with the shit-head who almost killed me?”

The anger crumbled and Bobby stared straight ahead of him, not seeing anything, fighting against a tightness in his chest and throat. Finally, he whispered, “... Yes... I’m sorry.”

There was a sound on the line Bobby couldn’t identify, then quiet.

“Judah?” he called. The quiet continued and Bobby pulled the phone away from his ear to check and see whether he’d been hung up on. The line was still live, so Bobby brought it back to his ear. “Judah?” The silence had occasional small, indefinable sounds poking out of it. “Judah?” Quiet continued and Bobby felt increasingly sick. “I’m sorry… I tried to just be mad at him.”

“I probably shouldn’t be surprised.” Judah’s voice was suddenly back, and Bobby could hear more than a little congestion in it. “He obsessed over you to the point that he casts you as the star of his supervillain plot, and then tried to off the competition, so obviously that’s got to be some kind of
fucking chemistry. Is that normal? Is that just how supervillains flirt? But what gets me is you. You. What, did you think ‘God it’s so hot that he’d kill someone for me’?

“No.”

“Are you sure?!”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Bobby said firmly. “I… I had a picture in my head of who he was years before I ever met him. And when I ran into him the first time, I attacked him based on that image I had… But since he’s been here, I’ve been having that image broken away bit by bit. Just-- Every conversation, even when it’s an argument, proves that everything I thought about him was a little bit or a lot wrong. And…”

“And was one of those first-impressions you were apparently mistaken about that he’s a violent piece of shit?” Judah demanded.

“… There’s people who just like violence… and there’s people who lash out with violence when they get scared,” Bobby said, his voice waverling in strength as he blinked quickly. “I figured him for the first, but I got it wrong.” Blinking wasn’t working to stave off the hot, damp feeling threatening his eyes, so he closed them, hoping to create a dam. “The first time I met him, and that night with you, he wasn’t just hitting, he was hitting back... because I hurt him, and I think-- I think that scared him.”

“Did I scare him? Because he didn’t stab you, he stabbed me.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not-- I’m not trying to downplay that. I’m just trying to explain why. Because I just- - I thought maybe knowing why it happened, maybe you’d sleep a little better knowing that it couldn’t happen again.”

“Maybe I’d sleep a little better knowing he was in jail!” Judah snapped.

“I get your logic, but… Daken’s broken in and out of more than one Soviet Union top-secret, high-security military science-bunker-prison thing before,” Bobby explained. “So, if we’d just called the police or the CSA agents or whatever and had Daken hauled off to a super-max, they maybe wouldn’t have been able to keep him in there a full week, and all it would have done is make him even madder at the X-Men and me.” He scrubbed the back of his hand across his eyes. “The not-really-reality ideal for prison is rehabilitation, right? Since we dragged Daken back to the school, we’ve gotten him not-sick, and Hank and Rachel have been tracking that to make sure he stays that way, and he’s been doing therapy, and not only has he not been a problem, he’s also helped with unrelated problems we were having.”

“Forget about him, forget his rehabilitation. This isn’t about how secure I’m going to sleep. I’m not upset about him not being in jail. I was never once afraid that he’d come after me again, because it’s pretty obvious he didn’t even notice me as anything but an accessory you were wearing.” Judah’s voice was even more congested now, with short little stops here and there, like maybe he had hysteria-hiccups. “I’m not mad because I’m afraid, Bobby! I’m hurt! You’ve fallen in love with a guy who tried to kill me! Who came within a quarter inch of really doing it! Do you seriously not understand how hurtful this is?!”

“... Yes… I think I do…¨ The dam had failed, Bobby’s cheeks were wet and his nose was starting to run. Images of Opal, cradling Hiro’s body while she yelled at Bobby to get out of her life, tore through his memory in full, visceral color. But that paled in comparison to Hong Kong. He never wanted to step foot in Hong Kong again. “Maybe you won’t believe it, but yeah… I’ve been run
over by the hurt-truck, and I know that the driver wasn’t really trying to hurt me, but that didn’t make it hurt less... And I’d still probably go running to slay dragons or fix her sink if that ex called.”

There was quiet for a while. Bobby pulled the phone away from his ear to check that the call was still connected twice, but didn’t call Judah’s name or pester this time. He just waited. Finally, Judah’s voice came back, pinched, quiet. “Why him? Of all the guys in the world, why did you have to fall in love with him?”

“Is there any answer I could give here that would actually be satisfying?” Bobby asked. “I’m not sure I even have an answer… It just happened.”

“... Can you absolutely promise me that it didn’t have anything to do with him attacking me?” Judah asked. “That no part of you was turned on at the idea that this guy wanted you bad enough to kill for it?”

“That’s sick,” Bobby spat in disgusted shock.

“I live in Hollywood, Bobby! We turn out no less than half a dozen big-budget big-screens a year billing stuff way more fucked up as ‘romantic’!” Judah’s voice was strained, a desperate edge to it. “Fucked up stalker-romance is what you were raised on, because it’s what every TV-and-movie-watching kid in this country was raised on!”

“No. I promise you, without a shred of doubt, there is no part of me that thinks it would be in any way romantic if he killed for me,” Bobby said, not even needing to force the ironclad tone his voice took on. “I don’t want him to kill for me, I don’t want him to kill at all.”

“It’s the opposite, isn’t it? You want him to stop killing for you, don’t you? Like a rehabilitation kink?” Judah asked. “You want to be the anime-princess whose plucky optimism rehabilitates all the bad-guys like a cleansing light. Well, you went and found a perfect live-action anime-boy, didn’t you!”

Bobby was still and silent, not breathing for a few seconds. He iced over his guts, he wasn’t confident in his ability to stay calm in the flesh. “... You’re hurt, and you have a damn good reason to be, so I’m trying really hard right now to not be angry that you’re belittling my emotions and my ability to even have legitimate emotions,” he said quietly. “But I don’t have to prove to you or anyone that I can feel love... Or that Daken is a human being deserving of love.” He closed his eyes and bit his lip for a few seconds. “... He said he wanted to apologize to you, and I believe him because I’ve watched him over the last month, trying really hard to get his life together and be the better person that we never gave him the chance to be before... But if you don’t want an apology, if thinking of him as a human being would make things harder for you, then fine. That’s fine. Sometimes dehumanizing someone who hurt you is a coping-mechanism, right? And I guess if you’re not turning it to public or otherwise toxic-destructive-hate, then... whatever. It’s fine.”

“... You’re such an asshole,” Judah said, and then Bobby definitely heard a sob follow it.

“... I’m sorry... I wasn’t trying to hurt you.”

Judah made a hic-sob and said quietly, “I know... You’re not the type who hurts people out of spite... I mean, he obviously is... So maybe what’s making me so mad now is I’m scared for you.”

Bobby wiped his knuckles across his cheeks and took a deep, steadying breath. “The person you met... He was really fucked-up on something that he didn’t put into his body willingly. It was
forced on him,” he said, trying hard to sound convincing. “He’s different when he’s in control of his own mind. He’s… He doesn’t have a ‘selfless hero’ personality, but he does care about things. I’m not sure he cares about himself, but he cares about the world his sisters and Zach have to live in, so he’s actually trying to make it better.”

There was a pause, and then Judah took a shaky breath, loud enough for the receiver to pick up. “... I don’t want him to have this number,” he said.

“Okay. That’s okay. That’s completely legit,” Bobby said, nodding.

“... I’ve got a TracFone that I’m not too attached to, if I decide to burn it later. I’ll text you the number… and keep it around and charged for the next few days.”

Bobby was a little startled. After how bad this conversation had turned, that fragile little concession was like dawn breaking. “Okay. Okay, that’s-- Okay.”

“I’m going to go do… I’m going to go. I’ll text you the number.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. Thank you. Good night,” Bobby said, words coming out overly fast as anxiety clawed at the back of his throat.

“Good night,” Judah said, voice tired, and then Bobby heard the soft beep of the call ending.

Bobby let his hand, and the phone in it, drop away from his ear and closed his eyes. He pulled his knees up and curled in on himself, then iced himself over completely. Semi-numbness brought relief with it. It quelled the nausea in his guts. It let him stop and erase the tears, gave him the chance to pull himself together. This had probably become a night for binging cartoons and eating waffles and jam for dinner. He wasn’t going to risk beer again; he wasn’t ready to humiliate himself again yet, so close on the heels of the last time.
Daken was laying on the floor of his front room. The book he was holding open above him had lost meaning some while earlier, but he wasn’t sure how long, or how many times he’d scanned the same page without absorbing the significance of any of its words. He was finally drawn out of this fugue by a knock on the door. He blinked a few times and rolled to his side, dropping his book on the rug, then pushed himself up, joints feeling stiff. How long had he been laying like that? Daken shook himself and walked to the door.

He opened it to find Drake standing outside, smelling of various sugary breakfast-foods. Daken was fairly certain he hadn’t been laying on the floor through a full night, and that Drake’s choice of sustenance was simply anachronistic. “Hi. So. I got a number for you,” Drake said, awkward and hesitant, holding up a post-it note.

Daken stared at the yellow slip of paper, slightly taken aback. He hadn’t really anticipated Judah actually wanting to talk to him. “... Thank you,” he said, reaching out to take it.


“I fell asleep on the floor,” Daken replied.

“Okay,” Drake said, brow pinching momentarily with concern. “But you’re okay?”

“Yes,” Daken agreed, looking down at the note and recognizing an LA area code. Then he glanced back up at Drake. “Thank you.”

“Uuhh,” Drake nodded again. “Are you… What are you doing right now?” he asked tentatively.

“I’m going to call,” Daken replied, holding up the note.

“Right away. Okay, that… makes sense,” Drake agreed. “I’ll, um…” He took a backwards step and wavered, glancing down the hall in the direction of his own suite. “I guess I’ll… let you do that then.”

“Thank you,” Daken found himself saying again, the awkward mood and situation twisting in him. “Good night.”

“Night,” Drake replied with a little smile that wasn’t particularly genuine but rather a polite reflex, and he started to drift away as Daken stepped back inside and pulled the door shut.

Daken paused for a minute and then went to put himself in the corner of his sitting room farthest from the front door. He pressed his back into the juncture of the walls as he slid down, settling on the floor with his knees bent upward, but not drawn tight against him. Pulling his phone out, he dropped it in the ravine of his lap, then stuck the post-it to one knee. He stared at it as he picked the phone up again, and fidgeted for a minute or two.

Finally, Daken opened the keypad screen and started dialing in the number. Putting the phone to his ear, he waited through three rings before the line picked up. “Hi,” a subdued voice answered.

“Hello. This is Daken.”

“I figured. This is a burner, and I wasn’t expecting anyone else,” Judah replied.
“That’s prudent… I owe you an apology. But I’m not sure I know how to sound sincere,” Daken said, feeling a frown on his brow. “That is, I know how to sound convincing, I know how to make people believe whatever I say, but that’s not really the same.”

“How are you sincere?”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” Daken mused, leaning his head back against the walls. “Maybe I don’t understand apologies. They always seem insubstantial… Isn’t the only thing that matters whether the behavior is repeated or not? But then, obviously there’s no reason that the behavior in question would be, because I don’t anticipate any reason I’d ever even be in the same room as you again.” He bit his lip for a moment, staring unseeing at the room in front of him. “But now this probably sounds like I’m rationalizing not apologizing, doesn’t it?”

“Kind of, yeah,” Judah agreed, and there may have been an annoyed edge in his voice.

Daken sighed, lowering his eyes, gaze falling across his knees but not focusing. “I don’t know you, so I can’t knowledgeably make any statements about what you ‘deserve’, but I know that I didn’t have the right to hurt you,” he said carefully. “You weren’t my target. Collateral damage is synonymous with victim, and if you’re a victim then I’m your abuser… I don’t want to be an abuser.” The last statement came out in a much weaker voice than he’d intended, sounding broken.

There was quiet on the line for a minute or more before Judah responded. “Bobby told me you were under the influence of a ‘deathseed’.” It wasn’t really phrased as a question, but it offered enough of a conversational hook to keep moving along.

“He was probably more generous than I’d really call warranted. He’s witnessed the worst a deathseed can do and been the worst a Death can be,” Daken sighed. “But I don’t like to--”

“What the hell does that mean?” Judah cut him off sharply.

Daken frowned in confusion at the interruption. “I’m sorry?”

“What do you mean Bobby’s ‘been the worst’?”

“That’s... Well, ‘worst’ is a subjective word, but he was certainly the most destructive,” Daken clarified.

“What are you talking about?” Judah demanded.

Daken grimaced and rubbed his free hand over his face. “... He told you about my deathseed but didn’t tell you about his deathseed episode?” he asked, feeling a surge of annoyance that Drake had put him in this position.

“No, it must have slipped his mind,” Judah said, tone reflecting the annoyance Daken was feeling. “You’re saying he has the same evil-mind-control bullshit running through his veins as you?”

“Not anymore,” Daken sighed, taking his hand away from his face and resting the arm across his knees. “His physiology when he’s in ice-form seems to come with an exceptional number of perks. His teammates were able to sever him from the deathseed. That isn’t normally possible once one has fully integrated itself.”

“... You said he was the ‘most destructive’ one?”

Daken took a deep breath through his nose and held it for a few seconds, lips pursed. “The global ‘mega-storm’ three years ago?” he murmured.
“... That was **him**?”

“Drake didn’t have more violent intent than any other recipient of a deathseed, but he was so vastly more powerful,” Daken explained, and then bit his lip for a few seconds, staring at nothing. “... My healing factor makes me close to unkillable, but as far as offensive abilities capabilities go, my mutation is no more dangerous than a few shots of tequila and a pair of kitchen-knives. I can survive almost anything, but I don’t have much actual **power**. Drake has... **a lot.**”

There was quiet on the line for a minute before Judah responded. “And so these deathseeds, they-their power-levels over nine-thousand and then turn them murderously evil?” he asked.

Daken considered that for a moment. “They do definitely add **power**. Though mine manifested differently when Zach tweaked it than it had when I was first seeded, and it manifests differently in different Deaths, so it doesn’t seem to be a very **consistent** augmentation,” he said. “But evil is a subjective concept. I don’t like to be subjective when trying to convey an explanation of some kind... When a deathseed is active, it hurts. Physically yes, but it also makes every thought hurt. And it makes its host externalize that hurt, makes them angry, makes them want to punish everyone.” He lowered his gaze and sucked in his lip, wetting it and holding onto it for a moment but not biting down, before continuing. “Apocalypse and the pretenders to his throne try to claim that it’s the ‘power of evolution’, and that the function of one who has been infected with a deathseed is to cull the weak from the herd. They believe this because the idiots don’t know the first thing about Darwinian evolutionary theory and are making assumptions based upon bastardized misconceptions of it.”

“**Why do all the mutant supervillains use evolution as an excuse?**” Judah asked, and it didn’t sound like a question truly directed at Daken so much as musing. “If humans are supposed to get ‘out-evolved’ by mutants, doesn’t the theory of natural-selection mean you have to either eat us or out-compete us for resources? Did Darwin pose any theories about cullings?***

“Non-mutants,” Daken said quietly.

“**What?**”

“You said ‘humans and mutants’, Daken clarified. “You meant ‘non-mutants and mutants’.”

“I- I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry, you’ve probably never been corrected before. And considering how often that self-alienating nomenclature comes up in-house, it’s easy enough to assume that it’s simply appropriate,” Daken sighed, shaking his head. “The correction needs to be made internally... The X-Men and the school have set themselves up as the arbiters of ‘right’ mutant behavior, and, much as I take issue with that assumption at all, they have a great deal of influence both within the community and in how mutants are viewed from the outside. And so we need to be more responsible with our language. It’s irresponsible to believe that it doesn’t matter. How we speak is how we teach ourselves and our children to think and how we interact with our world.”

“You’re kind of a linguistics-nerd, aren’t you?” Judah noted.

Daken frowned slightly. “How do you reach that conclusion?”

“You’ve said twice in this conversation that you don’t like ‘subjective words’, and now this with language as a social responsibility?” Judah elaborated.
“George Orwell proposed the question of whether a concept could be destroyed by destroying the words used to describe it,” Daken said. “And while this may not really take a basic urge out of the psyche of individuals, they would be robbed of the ability to communicate that urge. If ‘fair’ was taken away, then people would still desire fairness, but they wouldn’t be able to express it, and so they would all be isolated in that desire and unable to organize rebellion against the force that stole the word and concept of ‘fair’ from them.”

“Wow, you are a huge nerd.”

“... I’m educated.”

Judah’s voice laughed quietly.

“Do you find me less threatening or contemptible as a nerd?” Daken asked.

“Maybe.”

“Probably not because of some outdated notion that ‘nerd’ goes along with ‘weak’, since you already know I’m formidable… So then it’s because I’ve humanized myself to you, both linguistically and conceptually,” Daken mused.

There was a dispirited sigh on the line. “I wish you hadn’t. I think I wanted to keep hating you,” Judah said.

“So you hoped I’d say something more hateable?”

“You were off to a good start with the cooly-analytical thing… But you’re more philosophy-paralysis than psychopath, aren’t you,” Judah didn’t really so much ask as make note.

“... I wanted to be a psychopath for a while… If I was a psychopath, then I wouldn’t have to be ‘traumatized’. I could just be born broken. And maybe I wouldn’t have to feel… things I didn’t want to feel.” Daken closed his eyes and drew his knees closer to him. “It didn’t work though… And it turns out trying to make soulmates of violent psychopaths is a hazardous venture no matter how nigh-unkillable one is.”

“How many psychopaths did you try to be soulmates with?”

Daken drew a breath through his mouth and let it out through his nose. “... There were two I kept coming back to, and I suppose I expected something from them. But I don’t think I really tried forge any deep, emotional connection to either of them… And then there was one… she was the one who started talking about love… but then she changed her mind. With a gun. Pointed at my head.”

“Wow… Um. Wow… Did you… do something she found threatening?”

“... Existentially-threatening, I suppose,” Daken conceded. “I posited that the system was broken, and that working outside of it would bring her more satisfaction… But she didn’t want to play Boondock Saints with me.”

“Boondock Saints?”

“The movie.”

“Yeah, I know what Boondock Saints is. I don’t know what you meant,” Judah retorted.
“She was FBI. She became FBI because she wanted to solve puzzles, outwit adversaries, and punish people it was socially-acceptable to punish,” Daken explained, picking at the outside seam of his jeans, listening to his fingernails make quiet snapping sounds as they hooked the ridge and pulled off of it one at a time. “I got her a gift of a bound and gagged sex-trafficker and a pistol that couldn’t be traced to her… She didn’t like it.”

There was quiet for a moment, and then a soft, not-quite-healthy-sounding laugh. “Should have gone with flowers I guess.”

“But what if she had allergies? It might have ended just the same,” Daken sighed.

“With her aiming a deadly flower at your head?”

“Yes.”

“So it sounds like you’re a fan of creative and elaborate gifts,” Judah said.

“Creativity shows you put thought into what would make them happiest,” Daken hummed.

“I don’t think Bobby would want a sex-trafficker and a gun.”

Daken bit his lip for a moment, staring at the grain of the twill stretched over his knee. He supposed he should be relieved that Drake had apparently mentioned such a connection forming between them when he’d spoke to Judah; however, a feeling of anxiety reasserted itself in his gut instead. “... No, probably not. He was a bit upset about the Hydra agents… But I like to think that was mostly shock, rather than any genuine concern over the welfare of Nazis.”

“I’m going to say ‘yes’...? What Hydra agents?” Judah asked.

“The ones who kidnapped my little sister, beat her, and put her in a trunk,” Daken replied. “They’re in a morgue, a potter’s field, or incinerated now.”

“... Wow. So... Huh.”

“Does that seem unreasonable?”

“I can’t really say ‘yes’. I mean, Nazis,” Judah said. “And it sounds like they gave you some pretty strong motivation.”

“Yes,” Daken agreed. “Drake didn’t like that I’d bloodied my claws on them though. Everyone’s being... Perhaps they equate me engaging in such activities to an alcoholic taking a drink?”

“Are you addicted to killing?”

“... No,” Daken said softly, shaking his head. “... I have an addictive personality, but killing was never... After they were on the ground, I didn’t feel satisfaction in it.” He closed his eyes again. “I didn’t get a kick out of killing them, and I’ve had no urge to seek out more violence. I don’t... Since I’ve been here, I haven’t missed it... I miss the travel and I miss the problem-solving that comes with trying to work out how to do something difficult... But the blood... It’s just a bodily fluid. No different from any other.”

“... So you aren’t addicted to killing... but you don’t have a problem with it?”

“Are you a vegetarian?”
“No.”

“Then you don’t have a problem with killing either, you just prefer to avoid the messy part,” Daken reasoned.

“Well, I don’t eat people.”

“Oh, but think how eco-friendly it would be! You left-coasters are all about that, right? We could trim down the over-population issues without a lot of waste, and ease off the destructive cattle ranching industry a bit,” Daken replied.

“... Jonathan Swift,” Judah said.

“Well done.” Daken smirked a little.

There was a pause for a while that took on an uncomfortable feeling as it deepened. “You’re charming as fuck, aren’t you?” Judah finally observed. “I don’t think you can use your powers over the phone. You’re just charming as fuck.”

Daken bit his lip for a moment, brow pinching. “... I apologize for changing the tone. No, I do not feel anything in particular about killing. I was deliberately desensitized to it.”

“That’s not-- I wasn’t criticizing you for changing the tone,” Judah protested in a tired-sounding way. “... I talked to Bobby for a while earlier. And it seems like you’re the first and last thing on his mind... That’s kind of concerning. I couldn’t understand why he should like you, why he’s just calling the shit that went down last fall blood under the bridge... So maybe I’m being paranoid. And please correct me if this is bigoted, because maybe I’m not well-grounded enough in what that can sound like on mutant-topics, but... I felt your power, it was like getting infatuation shot right into my veins. Not just lust, but fascination and total awe too... And now you’re charming as fuck on top of that?”

Daken drew a faltering breath and pulled his knees closer to him, wrapping his arm around them. He stared unseeing at the room in front of him. “In point of fact, what you felt that night was the deathseed and Zach amplifying my powers by about twenty-fold,” he said carefully. “On my own, unaugmented, my powers are most effective when the people around me don’t know about them, because I’m not powerful enough to manage outright control, only strong suggestions... But... it is problematic finding myself in a situation with the same people every day... It’s possible that Drake has simply had too much exposure to me.”

“And you don’t just stop ‘strongly suggesting’ because?”

“I can’t,” Daken said, his voice coming out very quiet. He took a deep breath and tried again. “All animals, and plants too, generate pheromones nearly constantly. In certain situations, they produce stronger pheromones and at higher concentrations, but there’s always some background noise,” he explained. “For the majority of primates, pheromone emission is controlled subconsciously. Both that I can take conscious control of what pheromones I’m emitting, and that I produce vastly higher levels than a typical human, is what differentiates my pheromones as a power... But I have to be thinking about it to control it. It’s difficult to think about it every minute of the day. And I can’t just take control by starting to think about it when Drake happens to walk by, because everything stays on my skin and in my clothes. Lingering traces of every feeling I’ve had since the last time I bathed... And my ‘neutral’ pheromones, when I’m not thinking about anything, are attractant. Not specifically sexual, but if someone is already inclined to think of me in that context, then their body might interpret it that way.”
Judah was quiet for a few minutes. “... So you can’t tell if Bobby is falling in love with you, or if your powers are just tricking his body into believing he is?” he finally asked.

“... Yes,” Daken agreed. “I’d been told recently that engaging in consensually-fake sham relationships is... That I shouldn’t do it... But maybe there was a false assumption that the facade was the problem, when really I just shouldn’t be inflicting myself upon anyone.”

“Forever alone, huh?”

“That would be safer, wouldn’t it?” Daken asked quietly.

“Correct me if I’m wrong: You’re two steps away from the edge of crazy, right?”

“... ‘Crazy’ is subjective,” Daken said, then pursed his lips for a second. “But you’re not necessarily wrong.”

“I’m not sure self-imposed isolation actually is safer,” Judah said slowly. “I can’t say I’m thrilled about the possibility that Bobby might be a butterfly caught in your net, but... trying to be a hermit when your brain isn’t geared for it seems really really unhealthy. And if you’re already on the edge of crazy, it’s the kind of thing that would probably snap you... And you’re fucking scary when you snap. So that’s not great for anybody.”

“I’ve gotten through life this far by picking up strangers one night at a time,” Daken said quietly. “On good nights, I could pretend that nothing outside of that night existed... A snowglobe view of reality... If that’s enough to keep madness to a dull roar, then isn’t it more responsible?”

There was a short pause before Judah responded. “I’m not sure if that’s really realistic. As in, I’m not sure if you’re actually ‘keeping madness to a dull roar’, or if you’re just bottling it up until the next meltdown,” he said. “And if that’s the case, then, no, not really. Not responsible.”

Daken was quiet, staring out at nothing and chewing on his lip. He wasn’t sure how many minutes faded by, before the anxiety souring his stomach finally formed itself into words. “But it’s better than not being sure if I’m raping someone,” he said.

“... Wow... Fuck... I- I don’t...” Judah faltered. “... Bobby said you have a therapist. That is a thing to talk to your therapist about.”

“My therapist can’t change the effect my powers have on people,” Daken said.

“They can maybe problem-solve how you cope with your powers though,” Judah replied. “I don’t think... I don’t think you should just be not allowed to have relationships because of your powers. That’s too gross... Maybe I’m being naive, maybe I’m just not understanding mutant-problems and taking a simplistic view, but... It’s bullshit. The reason there is a ‘mutant community’ is so that mutants don’t have to be isolated by their powers, right?”

“I don’t know,” Daken said, shrugging to himself. “I’m new to the community aspect.” He closed his eyes. “... I’ve been tutoring a young man with a pheromone component to his powerset. I told him on the first day that his power didn’t preclude genuine relationships... but his pheromones are weaker than mine.”

“The same principal should still be true. If your powers are twice as strong, you just have to be twice as careful about- about communicating with the people it effects, I guess.”

Daken chewed on his lip for a moment, not breaking the skin. “... That may be a valid
philosophical view, I’m not sure it’s practical though.”

“... That’s probably something you need to talk to Bobby about,” Judah said.

Daken sighed heavily, opening his eyes and casting them up to the ceiling. “He’s been wanting to talk… For the past week and a half, he keeps asking to talk. Asking to eat together and talk… The anger that kept preoccupying him in our previous interactions vanished all of a sudden and now he just smells nervous and hormonal.” He bit down hard on his lip for a second or two and then continued. “... I wanted him to talk to you… He needed to talk to you. It was getting... problematic.”

“I thought you needed to talk to me,” Judah said, his voice quiet with a sudden undercurrent of tension. “Bobby called me to ask if it was okay for you to call and apologize.”

“Yes,” Daken agreed quietly. “I was reasonably certain he hadn’t spoken to you since I’d been here… And as there are always amature paparazzi in the park, watching the school and waiting for something interesting to happen…” He shook his head slightly, gaze dropping to his rug and getting lost in the pattern of it. “It was only a matter of time before you might happen to see a photo of me. Here. And if that were to come as a surprise to you… Drake needed to be the one to tell you. And I’m sure part of him knew that, but I believed he’d avoided it, and the level of discomfort he showed when I asked about you did serve as confirmation on that count… He finds it easier to do things when he’s being told that someone near him needs them. So I told him that I needed to talk to you.”

“... You manipulated him into calling me?”

“He needed to do it,” Daken protested, frustrated that he even needed to explain why it was important. “You had a right to hear it from his lips how and why I’d transitioned from the X-Men’s terrorist-watch list to a protectorate. He owed it to you, and it had been over a month.” He gritted his teeth for a moment. “It was uncomfortable, wondering if you even knew I was here. And you have no obligation to my comfort obviously, but I felt that Drake did have an obligation to tell you I was here, if nothing else.”

“Then you should have told him that!” Judah nearly shouted. “You could have told him that he was making you uncomfortable! You didn’t have to use sly tactics to trick him into calling me! Just fucking tell him that you needed him to call me!”

“That… That would have just made him feel guilty,” Daken protested.

“And manipulating him is better?”

Daken stared at the rug, his chest feeling tight and his stomach queasy. “... I think the answer you’re looking for is ‘no’... but I’m not sure if I don’t understand it or if I simply disagree.”

“Oh my God…” The utterance came out muffled, undirected frustration. “You honestly don’t see a problem with manipulating someone you care about?”

“... That’s how…” Daken stopped, closed his eyes, and swallowed against the bile in his throat.

“Okay, remember when I said that you need to talk to Bobby about how your powers affect your personal relationships?” Judah reminded, voice still rough with outrage. “You need to talk about this shit first. You need to own this. Tell him that you manipulated him, and talk about why you thought that was your best option, and work out, together, how you can both avoid situations that
make you feel like it’s the best option.”

Daken took a deep, shaky breath. “... Maybe I should just be avoiding guileless people.”

“You’ve already dug this hole. If you don’t think this thing with Bobby is going to work, then fine, maybe it won’t. But you need to talk to him about that, not just ghost him. He deserves the chance to have a conversation about this and understand why.”

“... You... You make it sound like there’s two choices,” Daken said quietly. “You don’t think that the only responsible thing to do is end it before it starts?”

“I honestly don’t have anything to go on here beyond what you told me,” Judah said. “The idea that you don’t even know if you’re seducing him? Yeah, that’s fucking terrifying. But I don’t know enough about any of this to have any legitimate opinion here.” There was a pause and a frustrated sigh on the line. “Talk to your therapist. Talk to some expert-of-mutant-powers like Doctor Beast. Most of all, talk to Bobby. He deserves to be part of this conversation.”

“... What do you want?” Daken asked, and he wasn’t sure why. Why would that matter?

“What?”

“Do you want me to cut it off and stay away from him?” Daken clarified.

Judah was quiet for several minutes. “... Bobby has a good heart and he deserves to be happy,” he finally said in a quieter voice. “And you’re maybe not such a monster... I think I’m not going to have nightmares about you anymore.”

Daken sighed deeply. “I’m glad that shining a light on the pathetic things hidden in my dark corners could bring you relief,” he said. “Please don’t spread any of that around though, it’s rather important that the seedy underbelly of the criminal world continues to be afraid of me.”

“... Do you love him?”

Daken stared blindly across the room for a few minutes. “... I can’t love... If I ever possessed that ability, it was cut out of me a long time ago... But I know how to belong to someone, and... I think maybe I wouldn’t mind Drake owning me.”

There was a long silence before Judah responded, “That’s one for your therapist too.”

“Sure,” Daken agreed with a nod, wondering if he ought to be making a list of such things.
Bobbie might just be sugar-binging at this point.

Chapter Summary

Trigger Warnings:
References to canon character-death.
References to suicide and murder.
References to child abuse and indoctrination.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Emmy?” Daken gasped, sitting up. The room was pseudo-silent, no foreign heartbeats or scents of recently halted ones. He was alone in the dark. He stared into the shadows for what felt like a long time, waiting for his own heartbeat to slow, and then lay back down again, trying to push a pretty girl, too young to have reached her potential, out of mind. Honeysuckle and rosemary perfume. Blond hair, no scent of bleach. The smell of a healthy diet and regular exercise. Smart, cunning, witty. She could have gone far. She should have.

Daken pushed the blankets back and rolled to the side, swinging his legs off the bed and sitting up again. He paused for a moment, running his hands over his face and hair and sighing heavily, then he pushed himself to his feet and went to get dressed.

As he stepped out into the hallway, Daken paused, inhaling deeper as vanilla and butter caught his attention. He frowned, looking down the dark hallway for a moment, before starting to move toward the scent, bare feet padding softly over the hall runner. He followed it to the staff kitchen and opened the door quietly, leaning in. Drake was standing at the counter dressed in pajama bottoms and a plain undershirt, moving cookies from a baking sheet to a cooling rack and humming to himself. Daken stayed still for a moment, staring blankly. When Drake turned, having laid all the cookies out to cool, his eyes caught Daken and he startled, nearly dropping the baking sheet.

“Jesus, Daken!” he exclaimed, fumbling to get a grip on it again. “What’s with the lurking, man?”

“... It’s three AM,” Daken noted softly, stepping into the room and shutting the door behind him.

“Already? I didn’t think we were quite there yet,” Drake said, glancing at the microwave display.

“Nearly,” Daken said, eyes wandering over him. “You’re baking.”

“Well what else am I going to do at three AM?” Drake shrugged, setting the baking sheet on the range. “... When I was a kid, sometimes I’d wake up in the middle of the night and smell cookies. I’d go downstairs, and my mom would be in the kitchen. And she just said ‘three AM is for baking’ or something... I get the same kind of insomnia sometimes. I don’t know if it’s a stress-trigger or what,” he rambled.

“Could be a cortisol or gabba imbalance,” Daken murmured and leaned against the wall next to the door. Drake raised an eyebrow at him. “I read,” Daken said.
Drake nodded, studying him. “So why are you up? You probably don’t get imbalances, what with the perfect bodily health thing,” he noted.

“Balancing out the imperfect mental health?” Daken chuckled darkly.

Drake’s brow pinched and he sucked in his lip a moment. “... Are you okay?” he asked.

“Never,” Daken said, looking away.

Drake was quiet for a few seconds, smelling of worry, then asked, “Do you want a cookie?”

“... There was a girl... There were others with her, but they were chaff. The girl... she wasn’t much older than Laura is now,” Daken said quietly, gaze drifting down to the tiles on the floor. “It was because of me, because I leaked a video of myself swearing at an old woman to the media... I did it to annoy Osborn. And it did.”

“... Okay, so, how’d that come back to the girl?” Drake asked softly.

“Osborn created a ‘terrorist cell’ for me to take down... to fix my public image,” Daken explained slowly. “Why he decided that America wanted to see a pretty white-girl dead, I’m not sure... I suppose to seed paranoia or something,” he shrugged. “The first time he sent me in after his invented terrorists, with all the cameras rolling, they’d just caught onto the fact that they’d been duped. They were angry. They... They were poorly coordinated and I got overconfident, lax. One of them scored a lucky shot and none of them hesitated for a second. Once I was down, they kept me down. Beaten and humiliated in front of the cameras.”

“But you wanted to make Osborn look bad and stuff, right?” Drake asked.

“I didn’t take a dive, I made a mistake and they honestly trounced me,” Daken closed his eyes and shook his head. “I- I don’t like that feeling. I don’t like being helpless and overpowered... It scares me.”

“Okay. Got it. So... It didn’t end there, right?” Drake prompted.

“... They made me afraid. It was just for a moment, but the made me afraid,” Daken whispered.

Drake moved, walking across the room slowly, cautiously. He stopped in front of Daken and gently put a hand on his arm. “So what happened?”

“They were hiding in a condemned office building. I took them by surprise. And I took them apart,” Daken said, his voice becoming hollow and toneless as his mind went painfully numb. “They got a few bullets into me. But I healed, they didn’t... While I was gutting the last of the chaff... Emmy tried to barricade herself in a bathroom, but she didn’t have the means to do any kind of decent job of it. Maybe she just thought she could use the blind corner as an advantage... She was grasping at straws.”

“... Alright, so she’s in the bathroom. And everybody else is dead,” Drake restated after Daken’s pause had gotten too long.

“I talked to her,” Daken whispered. “She was scared. She was angry. She knew she was going to die. She had one or two bullets left... I told her putting them into me wouldn’t save her from what I was going to do to her... I- I wasn’t really going to kill her... But I made her think I was. I wanted her to feel that fear... And she wanted to go out on her own terms.”

“What happened?” Drake whispered.
“She told me off, then put the gun under her chin and unloaded it into her brain,” Daken said.

Drake was still standing close, hand still on Daken’s arm, not drawing back in disgust like he rightly should. “... And you feel guilty about that?” Drake asked after a few minutes.

“... I’d learned before my mid-teens not to associate with anybody I respect,” Daken whispered, gaze pointed toward the bottom cabinets, unfocused. “Since anybody I saw more than once or twice had to die, I realized that I should only inflict myself on petty, annoying, cruel people the world wouldn’t miss... But... after I’d theoretically cut my ties to him, I was... I didn’t know why I was doing anything... I don’t know why I did this...”

Discomfort, frustration and confusion were on Drake’s face and in his scent. “... Why did people you knew have to die?” he asked at last.

“The explanation given was to maintain my anonymity. The real reason was that it’s an important ingredient to brainwashing and indoctrination,” Daken replied, answering with cold facts was much easier than trying to analyze strange, ephemeral things like thoughts and emotions. “The subject has to be isolated from sane ideas and points of view to prevent them from thinking in any real or significant way... It’s why the nastier cults of the twentieth century liked to situate themselves on rural communes with plenty of empty acreage around them.”

“And so, the killing...?” Drake asked in confusion.

“It wasn’t practical to keep me on a commune,” Daken explained carefully. “He wanted me to walk out in the world while still remaining under his power. He taught me to self-isolate by ordering me to kill anyone who was nice to me, or whom I showed too much interest in.”

“He made you do it?” Drake asked.

“Yes.”

“Did you ever say ‘no’?”

Daken was silent for several seconds. “Just once... a few weeks after he came for me... Never made that mistake again. I’m a quick study.”

“What- What hap--” Drake started.

Daken grabbed the hair at the back of Drake’s neck and kissed him hard, aborting the inquiry. Drake pulled back, apparently put out by the suddenness or roughness. Daken let him break the kiss but pulled their bodies closer, trapping him in a hug. “Shhhhh,” he breathed next to Drake’s ear.

“Stop. You can just say you want a subject change,” he said. Instead of trying to pull away, after a moment’s pause, Drake wrapped his arms around Daken’s waist, completing the embrace.

“How about a venue change instead?” Daken whispered and nuzzled his neck. “Your room? We could help each other sleep.”

“... I think that might be a bad idea right now,” Drake replied.

“Because you’re too nauseated? Because under the gilt veneer, I’m such an ugly creature?” Daken asked.

“That’s not it. That’s not what I’m thinking,” Drake shook his head. “I really don’t think ‘I need a
“distraction’ is a good foundation for… wherever this thing is going.”

“Where is it going?” Daken asked, keeping a tight hold of him, unwilling to surrender any ground.

Drake was quiet for a few seconds and then sighed. “There’s a lot of back-and-forth, isn’t there? It just… It seems like every time you’ve actually made a pass is when it’s something like this. When you’re hurting and I’m… the nearest warm body,” he said, voice soft in the way of rotten fruit. “A few smart people who usually know what they’re talking about have made it sound like you’ve got a legitimate condition. I’m not going to take advantage of you being at the bottom of a moodswing.”

“‘Take advantage’,” Daken scoffed. “I’m not *drunk*.”

“Well I don’t know how depression or bipolar or PTSD or whatever you’ve got works, but my loose understanding is that some kind of brain-chemistry is involved,” Drake gave a slight shrug. “All I know is you’re not acting totally normal, so I have to assume you’re not thinking normal either. I mean, it seems like you hate me more often than you like me.”

“Hate. Do you even know what that word means?”

Drake made an irritated sound in the back of his throat. “Can we skip the whole ‘you’re a naive idiot’ speech just this once, please?”

“*Hate* is more obsessive than love,” Daken whispered right into his ear. “*Hate* is anger, fear, revulsion so strong you feel the vomit rising in your throat. Hate isn’t just hate for them, half of it is for yourself, for letting them take you. It is betrayal at its purest, strongest, because true hate only comes from trust.”

“Cameron Hodge,” Drake said without any hesitation in his voice or the tiniest hint of uncertainty in his scent. “He used us, my friends and me, he tricked us into starting a fresh wave of anti-mutant hysteria. Kitty knew a kid who committed suicide because of it. And he used Warren’s money to bankroll his own personal anti-mutant militia, The Right. And then the son of a bitch murdered Warren.”

Daken was quiet for a while, overlaying that information against what he knew of X-Men history from the public record. “This was the ‘X-Factor’ thing?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“And Hodge? I suppose you put him in prison?”

“Warren decapitated him. After the Apocalypse makeover,” Drake corrected. “But since apparently the whole thing wasn’t nightmarish enough already, it turns out before that, Hodge got magical immortality from a *demon*. So he is an immortal disembodied head. But then he got somebody to build him a God damned *robot body*. And then he added alien-robot-people chunks to it from another X-Man he murdered, and now he’s an infectious robot *people-eating-virus* body with a human *head*. And he just *keeps. coming. back.*” By the end of the explanation, Drake was trembling.

Daken started laying down comforting pheromones and combed his fingers gently through Drake’s hair. “So maybe you do have a fair understanding of hate,” he murmured. “But do you really believe I could live in the same building as someone I truly hate?”

Drake sighed and shook his head slightly, leaning into Daken a little bit. “So hate’s too strong a word… But we’ve done a lot of fighting, and I don’t know when it’s coming because I just can’t
read you. I don’t know what you want. I don’t know when you’re telling me the truth or lying. I
don’t know if the truth just plain changes.”

“You’re chasing unicorns. The truth doesn’t exist,” Daken corrected. “... You’re making the
mistake of seeing me as a ‘real person’. I’m not. Romulus carved me like a pumpkin. I’m a doll. So
we can play pretend. Tell me who you want me to be, I’ll be that.”

“... You’ve offered to be my hook-up, my hook-er, and now my doll,” Drake said quietly, moving
his hands to Daken’s shoulders and pushing him back a little, not breaking contact but holding him
out to look at his face. Daken could feel his eyes without looking back into them. “But none of that
is what I want.”

Daken swallowed, staring at the collar of his shirt a moment longer before glancing up. “... That’s
all I am.”

Drake stared at him with a mix of pain and pity in his eyes and scent. “No you’re not.”

“You want ‘more’, but I don’t have ‘more’,” Daken shook his head, lowering his gaze again.
“Johnny said I don’t feel real love.”

“... I am just sure he didn’t use that phrasing,” Drake said.

Daken wrinkled his nose and gritted his teeth in annoyance. “What makes you so
sure?” he
demanded quietly.

“Because he’s not a complete bag of dicks,” Drake replied with an edge of tired exasperation in his
voice. “Only someone completely awful or completely stupid would say those exact words to you,
would think that about you.” He took a deep breath and sighed it out. He let his hands slide down
Daken’s arms a little, resting them just above his elbows and keeping a gentle but firm grip.
“Maybe you can contextualize this a little more for me?”

Daken wet his lip and then bit it lightly for a moment. “... He said what I feel, what I felt back then
and have been fretting since, that it’s not the feeling that ‘Forever’ is built on,” he said quietly. “He
said I’m broken. He said we’re both broken. That’s true, I already knew that…” He closed his eyes
and drew a shuddering breath. “He said… what I feel isn’t healthy, because I’ve attributed special
meaning to someone treating me the way everyone should treat me.”

There was a short lull, Drake was waiting to make sure he was finished. “Okay, so that sounds a lot
less dickish... I bet it still hurt a lot, but it doesn’t sound just mean for the sake of mean,” he said
slowly. “And, I mean, assuming there was some lead-up to this, to make it a logical conclusion…
then it would be something to think about, anyway. It would be important to consider, at least.”

“That I can’t feel love?”

“Okay... Okay, you are hearing something different from what I’m hearing,” Drake sighed. “I’m
hearing that Johnny thinks your relationship started on a bad precedent because of where you were
at the time, and that’s what he told me too. That, and that he didn’t understand where you were and
made some mistakes because of not understanding what was going on with you.”

Daken stared blankly at Drake’s collar for a moment before looking up again. “... He told you this
when?” he whispered.

He watched Drake bite his lip, eyes glancing away, panicking. “I- I went over there. The other day.
There were some things he said on Friday that- that I needed to follow up on,” he explained
awkwardly. “And- And we talked about you... not in a behind-your-back-gossip way, just... It
seemed like what you told me on the stairs was maybe just because you wanted to see how I was going to react, and I just… I just wanted to understand what your status with Johnny was without that dance, because I don’t want to be a creep… And I’m saying that, but I’m also realizing that it’s stupidly ironic because maybe I’m being kind of a creep by checking up on your relationship-status behind your back and- and I don’t even know what I’m doing. I just…” He faltered, closed his eyes, swallowed, and took a breath. “I just wanted to know if I’m supposed to back off, or what’s happening. I don’t know what’s happening. I don’t know what you want me to do, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, and I don’t know if those are completely different things.”

Daken considered silently for a while, studying Drake, taking in his scent, and then leaned forward and kissed him softly. Drake held still, accepting the kiss, not pushing Daken away but not opening his mouth. Daken had a feeling if he tried to deepen it, he might get a rebuff, so he pulled back after a minute, then took a small step in and wrapped his arms around Drake’s shoulders again. He burrowed his face into the warm cavern he’d created against Drake’s neck for a moment, and the lifted his head just enough to be intelligible as he whispered, “…I want to sleep in your bed.”

“I… I don’t think that’s a good idea right now, Daken,” Drake said, circling his arms behind Daken again and holding him a little bit tighter than before.

“Please. Anything you want. I’ll be good,” Daken whined softly.

“I think I might have a hard time being good.”

“That’s okay,” Daken said.

“It’s really not,” Drake sighed and shook his head. “I-- You’re probably going to get mad or offended, and I’m not trying to be over-presumptuous here, but… I think-- It seems like maybe you have some really unhealthy associations in your head with sex.”

“Define.”

“I- I don’t--”

“Define ‘unhealthy’, ” Daken restated. He could hear, smell, feel Drake starting to panic. “Are you asking what sex means to me?”

“I... guess?” Drake gave a tiny, helpless shrug.

Daken took a deep breath and held it for a moment, thinking of where to start. “…For mammals wherein the females are sexually receptive outside the peak of their estrus cycle, the species has evolved to use sexuality as a social bonding mechanism,” he said, and was about to continue when Drake broke in.

“Seriously? Not the damn science, I meant emotionally. You can’t--”

“Yes, please, interrupt me before I can make any point at all,” Daken snapped.

“Sorry,” Drake muttered quickly.

“Such species,” Daken put a growl into his voice for a moment as he continued, “will tend to be on the high end of the intelligence spectrum-- speaking relative to class mammalia as a whole.” He ignored a sound of frustration from Drake. “But it’s not all mammals of high intelligence which have that trait, it’s only the ones for which the community is vital to the survival of the individual and which have a relatively egalitarian balance of power between males and females.”
“You think men and women have an ‘egalitarian’ balance of power?” Drake interrupted again, a heavy note of near-sarcastic skepticism in his voice.

“As compared to species in which the males are twice the size of the females? Yes. I said ‘relatively’,” Daken retorted. “How it works is that the elation experienced by the flood of neurotransmitters released during sex is interpreted by the higher brain functions as emotion, and, assuming the individuals involved aren’t narcissists, they will associate that emotion with their partner. Why it works, as part of a greater system for survival of the individual and collective, is that it creates stronger social bonds within the community.” Daken narrowed his eyes, feeling Drake’s rising irritation and getting annoyed that he was annoyed. “Sex being used in this capacity can only really be recognized in relatively intelligent species because when swans or penguins ‘mate for life’, that is a hardwired instinctive drive rather than being based in sentiment.”

“... You think sex is supposed to be part of a ‘til death’ thing?” Drake asked in a suddenly much quieter, more hesitant voice.

“Statistics, in cultures where women are fairly emancipated, suggest evolution has fine-tuned the duration of infatuation to reflect how long it takes to raise a child past the period of high mortality rates,” Daken mused. “Three to five years or so.”

“Love doesn’t last?”

“I’m a fairly cynical person, but believing that lifetime affection and contentment is impossible would require dismissing a robust body of data,” Daken replied. “No, there obviously is a kind of romantic-love which has a long potential shelf-life, and where that intersects intellectual, ideological and sexual compatibility, then there’s potential for the ‘til death’ thing.”

Drake was quiet for a few moments before starting again, softly, his annoyance apparently derailed, “So… I guess that’s your philosophy on love, but my question was really kind of simpler than that.”

“What does sex mean,” Daken murmured and sighed. “I could point out that I gave the most objectively correct answer possible, or that you interrupted me again, right after I’d established sentiment versus instinct.”

“How do you feel about it?” Drake clarified unnecessarily.

“That’s the point,” Daken said. “I feel exactly the way I’m supposed to feel. The way four million years on this evolutionary branch has honed me to feel.”

“You think everybody feels the same,” Drake frowned, not so much annoyed this time, but certainly discomfited.

“Not everybody’s as inclined towards clean, academic logic as me,” Daken shrugged.

“... And what are they? The feelings?”

Daken bit his lip for a moment, staring at nothing as he built and refined the ledger in his mind. “Comfort... intimacy… trust, in some aspect, would be necessary for people without a healing factor... an illusion of affection.”

“Just an illusion?”

“In my experience,” he agreed. A less than comfortable silence passed between them for a few minutes, until Daken felt compelled to add, “Sex is what I was allowed. I wasn’t allowed to have
friends. I wasn’t allowed to have acquaintances,” he explained. “Like I told you, he was keeping me isolated. The only kind of closeness I was allowed to have was sex. And I was allowed to stay the night afterwards, being held… So is comfort an ‘unhealthy’ thing to associate with sex?”

Drake was quiet for a while, radiating anxiety, probably trying to parse his words because he was afraid of starting another fight. “On its own, I think that wouldn’t be an unhealthy association, but you’re drawing a clear cause-and-effect line here, you’re thinking about what was done to you at the same time as you’re thinking about sex.”

“No, because I’m not just ‘thinking about sex’ right now, I’m analyzing, you asked me to analyze,” Daken bit back, annoyed.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry, you’re right. It’s more complex than that,” Drake said quickly, and then bit his lip a moment. “It’s just… If that’s always at the back of your mind—”

“I’m a nymphomaniac because I had a bad childhood. Maybe you want to go have a real-talk with half the actors in the pornography industry too,” Daken snapped. “I’m sure they could use your sagely counsel.”

“Look, I- I’m a math teacher. This is not my department,” Drake said, frustration clear in his voice. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m talking about, you’re right. I just… I’m scared of making it worse. I’m scared of hurting you.”

“You don’t want to hurt me now?” Daken murmured, sliding his fingers up the back of Drake’s neck and through his hair. “What changed?”

Drake’s reaction to the jab was immediate and wrenched. His arms constricted around Daken, pulling him in tight. “I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry!” he blurted, his voice raw, vehement.

The sudden intensity hit Daken like a wave crashing, and it was very abruptly too much. “Stop.” Daken gasped, lifting his arms away from Drake as a surge of nausea and merinthophobia rose in him. “Stop. Stop.”

Drake let him go and took a quick step backward, eyes wide. He smelled of anxiety bordering on fear. Daken moved away and put his back against the wall, then slid down until he was on the floor and pulled his legs up against himself. A few minutes of silence crept by before Drake said again, in a whisper, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t,” Daken said and dropped his head down, hiding his face behind his knees.

He could hear Drake moving, crouching down close by but not touching him. “What can I do?”

“Nothing. Stop it.” He didn’t like the presumption. He didn’t like any of this. He hated the overwhelming, suffocating feeling that had hold of him. Drowning. He drew a few quick, hysterical pants; he couldn’t get a deep breath because his crumpled posture was squeezing his lungs slightly, but he wasn’t willing to uncurl himself. A wheezing whine came out of him.

“Daken—”

“You think you can fix me?” Daken demanded raggedly, and then put his teeth back together and clenched them hard.

Drake was quiet for a few seconds. “… You’re a legally-competent adult. You can ask for help, but ultimately you’re the only one who gets to decide if you want to be fixed or who’s allowed to help
you get there,” he said quietly.

“So it’s my own fault, right? Everything that happened after I turned eighteen is my fault?” Daken growled, not looking at him.

“That’s not what I meant,” Drake protested, frustrated, upset, but not angry. “I meant-- I meant that if you don’t want to get my version of better, then you don’t have to. I don’t get to just ‘fix’ you, and I’m pretty sure I couldn’t just do the fixing for you. I don’t really know how to even help. I don’t know how to do anything right with you.”

Daken focused on getting his breathing back under control for a while, until he was drawing smooth breaths, if still a bit too quickly. Finally he picked a hook out of Drake’s rambling to pull on. “What’s your version of ‘better’?” he asked.

“I guess… not having panic attacks in the middle of the night?” Drake tried. “Not thinking of yourself as a doll.”

Daken was quiet for a minute, letting that settle. “And my morality?” he asked.

“… At this point, I’m not sure there’s anything specifically wrong with your morality,” Drake said slowly. “It seems like-- I think you’re more results-driven instead of ideals-driven… But you’re not completely into ‘the ends justify the means’ territory, because- because you were upset about the prison guards getting killed. I don’t know if that was you just being upset about ‘sloppiness’ or something, or if you were actually upset about them being dead.”

“I was fairly upset about my instructions being ignored,” Daken noted.

“Okay, I think you definitely might have some problems with figuring out who to trust,” Drake said in a half-groan. “But I’ve made that exact same bad-call about Raven, so I’m not one to talk there.”

“From what I hear, you made a different bad-call with her.”

“That’s-- Shut up,” Drake flustered.

Daken paused to consider Drake’s not-quiet-question about the prison guards’ deaths. “Morality is built upon knowledge or empathy. Nobody feels any particular morality about the death of a stranger unless it is based upon some form of idealism,” he carefully dissected. “In which case, it could be considered an ‘ethical’ rather than ‘moral’ outrage… I can be moral, but I am not ethical. Ethics are externally imposed. I won’t have that.”

“Is that… a ‘think for yourself’ thing?”

“For me. I don’t see it as so universally applicable that it could be cut and pasted as advice,” Daken clarified.

“So other people should be ethical, but ethics don’t apply to you?” Drake asked skeptically.

“Different cultures have subtly different ethics. Ethics are based upon upbringing. Do you think my upbringing would have instilled me with a good or useful set of ethics?” Daken challenged.

“… That’s a valid point,” Drake agreed.

“I can take Xavierian ethics or American ethics or Christian ethics into account as I build a morality, but any of them have some tenants I can agree with and some that I can’t,” Daken said,
lifting his head. He leaned back against the wall and took a deep breath as he finally gave himself room for it again. “I’m still refining my morality… There are some things I’m absolutely sure of... some I’m still trying to untangle from what I was taught.”

“... That’s probably, actually... better than most people. People that just think what they grew up with, I mean. You’re thoughtful about it. And- And you’re willing to rethink,” Drake noted. He was sitting with crossed legs, half a meter between his shins and Daken’s feet. He was looking down.

“Come here,” Daken said softly. When Drake glanced up at him, Daken gestured with a beckoning hand-curl, and then pointed at the floor next to him. “Closer.”

Drake was still for a moment, staring at him. “Let me get you a cookie first. Before I get too settled,” he said and climbed to his feet.

Daken watched him walk over to the counter and turn the oven off before pushing the cookies on the cooling rack off to a plate that already had a dozen or so waiting there. He turned around and walked back over, leaning down and handing the cookies to Daken, then sat down with his back against the wall too. Still far enough away that Daken could have set the plate down between them with a bit of room to spare. Daken pursed his lips in annoyance and transferred the cookies to his left hand, then reached out with the other. He hooked his fingers into Drake’s waistband and tugged sideways.

“Hey!” Drake snapped. “Use your words.”

“I already did. I said ‘closer’,” Daken retorted.

Drake gave a grumble and slapped lightly at Daken’s hand, but begrudgingly scooted sideways as it was removed. Once he’d settled, shoulder brushing Daken’s, he gave a quick sigh, letting go of his fluster, and muttered, “Try the cookies. Old family recipe.”

“Because vanilla sugar-cookies are such a unique phenomena,” Daken hummed, shifting the plate back to his right hand and balancing it against his knee as he picked one up off the top. “Though the choice of alligator pepper is intriguing,” he added before taking a bite.

“The ‘secret ingredient’ thing just doesn’t even work with you, does it?” Drake sighed, reaching out to take one for himself. “Do me a favor and don’t spread that around. I’ve had everybody here mystified for years.”

“Well then, it’s just gone from secret to conspiracy,” Daken chuckled. “It’s good.”

“I lied about the ‘old family recipe’ part.”

“I know.”

“Just makes it sound more mysterious,” Drake said between bites. “It’s really good in apple pie or pumpkin pie too.”

“Are you going to make me a pie?” Daken asked teasingly, watching him.

“ Probably not right this second,” Drake demurred. “It’s kinda late.”

“It is,” Daken agreed. “We should go to your room.”

The small measure of relaxation he’d built in the last few minutes drained out of Drake, and he
gave a frustrated sigh. “Daken…”

“I’m tired,” Daken said softly. “I want to sleep, but I’m being haunted. I want to listen to your breath. I want to sleep.” He was conscious of his voice shifting into a whine, it hadn’t been intentional but he didn’t bother to fight it. “I’m tired.”

Drake was silent for several minutes, before starting the arduous climb to his feet. “Let me put the rest of the cookies away first,” he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Bobby absolutely views Warren's possible-death (it was always a bit ambiguous whether Apocalypse teleported Warren out at the last moment before imminent death or if he resurrected him after an actual death) during the original run of X-Factor as murder and not suicide. I think Cameron Hodge may be the most thematically appropriate villain the X-Men have ever had. He's not the bombastic guy in a cape; he starts out as the Klansman who wears a suit and seems entirely normal when he's not wearing his hood, and then turns into the embodiment of institutionalized bigotry. It's kind of a shame he isn't used much anymore (he's obviously not dead, since he can't be!) because he can be one of the most terrifying villains in Marvel when written well.
Daken and Bobby discuss powers-dysphoria.

Bobby stepped over the threshold into his dorm not entirely sure that he was awake. This could be a dream. One of those dreams where all the details seemed perfectly realistic but the overall premise was ludicrous. He glanced back to make sure Daken was still drifting silently behind him like a ghost-ship. “... S-So...” Bobby faltered, a sudden sense of panic starting to creep in.

“Has there not been enough talking yet?” Daken asked quietly, eyes cast down and to the side. “I’m tired. Aren’t you tired?”

“Just, um... Did you want to get your pajamas or anything?” Bobby asked awkwardly.

“Why would you assume I own pajamas?” Daken retorted.

“... Uh...” Bobby’s brain skipped a couple times on that one. “... I...”

“Your so very American terror of nudity isn’t your most charming trait,” Daken drawled.

“I’m not terrified of nudity,” Bobby protested.

Daken gave a heavy sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t... Can we just skip this part? I apologize for criticizing your country’s Puritan roots. Can we just move on?”

“Okay,” Bobby agreed, not any more eager to argue about it than him.

“How do you want me then?”

“... What?”

“I don’t have pajamas,” Daken clarified tersely. “So how do you want me? Fully clothed? Lose the jeans, keep the rest? Something else?”

Bobby looked down for a moment, biting his lip. “Do... you want to borrow pajamas?”

“Okay,” Daken agreed without any fight.

“Okay,” Bobby nodded, and then turned and kept going back to his bedroom. He went to his dresser, pulled a pair of cotton pajama-pants out of the drawer and presented them to Daken.

“Here.”

“Thank you,” Daken murmured, accepting them.

“Yeah. No problem. I’m going to brush my--” Bobby started and then faltered, frowning as another issue with this very impromptu sleepover occurred to him.

“Are you going to let me borrow your toothbrush too?” Daken asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“I...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Daken said. “I’m sure my enamel can handle one night. And if not, I can always just get all my teeth knocked out.”

“That is the worst dental plan I’ve ever heard of,” Bobby chuckled, shaking his head, heading to the bathroom. “I’ll be back in a minute.”
“I believe four out of five dentists agree on two minutes,” Daken called after him.

Bobby smirked and sighed tiredly as he stepped into the bathroom. He stared back at his own eyes as he brushed his teeth, his mind racing and crawling at the same time. He probably shouldn’t be doing this. He shouldn’t be letting Daken stay in his room tonight, right? But it was innocent, so there wasn’t any harm in it. He just had to make sure it stayed innocent. He just had to not think about how unreasonably sexy Daken was and how unreasonably exciting it was that they were spending what was left of the night together. Innocently. No, he just had to remember that Daken was depressed or something, and that wasn’t sexy. He just wanted and needed someone to be with him and stave off the nightmares.

Bobby spit, rinsed his mouth and his toothbrush, and switched off the light as he went back toward the bedroom. He found Daken sitting cross-legged on the foot of the bed, now wearing the loose cotton pants. Bobby’s first thought was wondering if Daken had ever in his life worn plaid before. His next thought was the sudden realization that Daken was wearing his clothes, and Bobby was slightly startled at how sexy that thought was. No. No. This wasn’t a sexy night; this was a depressed night. “So… they fit,” Bobby noted lamely.

“Drawstrings tend to be pretty forgiving,” Daken replied.

“Right,” Bobby agreed. “So…”

“You can just turn off the light and lay down,” Daken suggested quietly. “There’s been enough banter now, hasn’t there?”

“… Yeah,” Bobby nodded and then, as suggested, reached out and flicked the light switch. He stepped through the darkened room and peeled back the covers as he heard Daken climb momentarily off the bed and do likewise.

Bobby settled down on his back, staring up at the ceiling with a feeling somewhere in between excitement and dread. He felt the mattress flex slightly as Daken got under the covers, and then instead of staying on his designated half, he crawled across and put himself flush against Bobby’s left side, draping an arm across him and snuggling his face up against Bobby’s neck and ear. Bobby stared up into the darkness, his heart pounding, trying not to pant, trying not to get aroused. He could feel Daken’s breath against his skin, hitting just below the corner of his jaw and fanning out against his neck. He was cuddled up so utterly sweetly. In Bobby’s bed. Wearing Bobby’s pants.

“… Is it that bad?” Daken whispered.

“I’m fine,” Bobby said quickly, and iced his guts. He wasn’t going to make it through tonight without extreme measures, or at least temperatures.

Two seconds later, Daken drew a sharp breath, tore himself away, and scrambled back with a franticness that bordered on violent. He backwards-crawled himself right off the bed, hitting the floor with a thump. “No,” he snapped. “No no no no no."

Bobby sat up. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Stop it!” Daken ordered.

“What are you--”

“You turned off your heartbeat!” he exclaimed. “Your breath crunches and it’s cold! I am not sleeping next to a god damned corpse! I came to get away from the dead!”
“I’m sorry!” Bobby gasped, startled by the visceral and extreme reaction. “I wasn’t trying to--”

“Stop it!”

Bobby quickly shifted back to completely flesh and immediately felt fifty percent worse about accidentally upsetting Daken. “I’m sorry. It’s just-- When I’m iced up, it’s easier to not feel things.”

“... You don’t want to feel anything about me,” Daken said in a quiet, closed-off voice.

“N-No, that’s not-- I just-- I was trying to not be horny right now because of the timing, the depression, it’s just-- it’s problematic. And I thought I could just… cheat,” he finished lamely.

There was silence for a minute, then he heard Daken move, getting up off the floor, and the mattress flexed as he crawled back into the bed. “Lay back,” he said.

Bobby did as he was told, not wanting to agitate Daken further by arguing. Then Daken was hovering over him, and he leaned down, touching his forehead to Bobby’s. Bobby closed his eyes and bit his lip, trying desperately not to get turned on. Minutes passed, the panicky feeling that had clung to him in the wake of his faux pas eased, leaving only weariness. Finally Daken shifted, and laid himself down against Bobby’s side again, snuggling back in just as close as he had been before. More minutes faded by, and Bobby felt nothing but lingering embarrassment and fatigue now. “... You can turn people off?” he whispered.

“Sure,” Daken replied against his neck.

“Why were you worried about being sweaty around the kids then?” Bobby wondered.

“Because anti-aphrodisia takes a conscious effort,” Daken murmured. “Attractant is something that just happens… Beguiling is just what I am when I’m not trying.”

“That’s true on a lot of levels,” Bobby mumbled and yawned.

“Go to sleep,” Daken breathed and kissed his neck.

Bobby sighed and acquiesced.

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Consciousness came drifting gradually toward him, like flotsam pushed by a rising tide, and bit by bit Daken became aware of another heartbeat and the swell and fall of another pair of lungs. When he became awake enough to find those things pertinent, he drew a deep breath and contemplated the scent it held. Drake. Traces of flour and sugar, evidence of the path that had brought him here. Daken opened his eyes and was faintly surprised by how much light was coming around the edges of the curtains on Drake’s window. He pushed himself up a little bit, being careful not to jostle Drake, and looked at the digital alarm clock seated on the nightstand. It was after six-thirty. When was the last time Daken had slept this late?

Gingerly, slowly, he sat up, pulling his legs under him and then stilling, staring down at Drake, who continued to take slow, even breaths, undisturbed. It had been a bad idea to come here, hadn’t it? A decision made while in the throws of loneliness and a desperate need for warmth. After the evening’s phone conversation, Daken had somewhat resolved to stop entertaining this fantasy. And then Drake had just been there, in the moment Daken was aching for some kind of solace. But it wasn’t providence, it was just Daken grabbing for comfort in an act of willful self-delusion.
He reached out and stroked the back off his fingers softly down Drake’s cheek. Then he delicately extracted himself from the bed, careful not to wake its other occupant. Daken put his jeans back on and draped the plaid pajama bottoms over the foot of the bed, then made his way out into the hall and back to his own suite to take a shower before his morning club.

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The alarm went off and Bobby slapped at it twice before managing to get the button. He switched the beeping off and yawned, sitting up and scrubbing a hand through his hair. He blinked in tired blankness as his eyes rested on a splash of plaid across the foot of his bed, and it took a while for the gears to connect themselves and start turning in proper alignment. He drew a sharp breath, suddenly feeling a lot more alert. His pajama pants. The ones Daken had borrowed. Because that wasn’t a dream, Daken had been here last night. And now he was gone. Without a word. He’d snuck out.

Bobby shook his head firmly and swallowed against the sudden knot in his throat. Daken had a class or club-thing to be teaching. Bobby couldn’t expect him to just play hooky for a late morning of cuddles. That was selfish and dumb. His gaze shifted to the window. Daken was teaching a class. Right out there. In all his shirtless glory. Bobby tossed back his covers and went over to the window, pulling the edge of the curtain out just a little to peak past it.

He leaned against the moulding and watched Daken wander around amid his students, eyes tracing every line and curve of his body, until Bobby’s knees started to ache from the awkward posture he’d chosen. He debated kneeling down on the floor to continue his borderline-voyeurism but decided it was probably getting a bit creepy, and he should go take a shower instead. He made it a long one, and, after brushing his teeth, he wandered back into the bedroom to get dressed, glancing at the bedside clock as he passed. Closing in on eight. He dug out some clothes and got into his pants quickly, then peeked out the window again before pulling his undershirt on. He finally peeled the curtains back and leaned against the moulding again, returning to his lookout but no longer with the clandestine overtones, which theoretically made it un-creepy.

After a few minutes, the class/club started dispersing, and then Daken looked right up at him. Bobby almost choked. It was only for a few seconds, and then Daken turned and started back toward the front door. Bobby stayed rooted to the spot for a minute, then twisted around and hurried to his own door. He opened it slowly, glancing around to see that the hall was momentarily empty, before bracing a hand against the jamb and leaning out. After an agonizing mini-eternity, Daken came around the corner down at the end of the hall. His eyes met Bobby’s and his stride didn’t change at all; he kept walking with purposeful calm until he stopped right in front of Bobby.

“Do… Do you want to get breakfast or something?” Bobby whispered.

Daken silently reached out, putting a hand against Bobby’s chest, and gave him a gentle push. Bobby stepped obediently backward. Daken walked into the room and closed the door quietly behind him, eyes now downcast. “... I can’t tell how much of what you feel about me has been influenced by my power leakage,” he said softly.

Bobby stared at him, the warm, excited feeling of a moment earlier turning to dismay. “That’s-- No. Dude, I was just watching you through a window, your powers don’t go through windows,” Bobby protested. “And- And this isn’t the first time.”

“I know,” Daken murmured, not looking at him.

“You… know.”
“It’s a sizeable garden, Drake. There’s plenty of adequate places to run a class besides right below your window,” Daken replied calmly. “And I’d already set myself up in that space before students started coming out to join me… I liked the idea that you might be watching,” he explained.

“… Oh.” Bobby’s heart started beating a bit faster.

“… I’m manipulative like that,” Daken whispered, and then bit his lip for a few seconds, turning his head away a bit. “I manipulated you into calling Judah, you know.”

Bobby stared at him, confused and taken aback. “What?”

“Apologizing to him wasn’t my priority. I just needed you to call him and tell him I was here at the least, before he found out some other way,” Daken explained, still refusing to look at him.

Bobby was silent for a minute, processing that and feeling stupid and embarrassed. “And you couldn’t have just asked me to?”

“I didn’t want to accuse you of not having already done it yet,” Daken said. “… Isn’t that how decorum works? Isn’t manipulation the polite thing to do?”

Bobby tried to figure out if Daken was making a joke, but it didn’t feel that way. “… But you changed your mind about that?” he asked.

“I might have been wrong,” Daken shook his head. “I’m not sure… Judah said it was problematic.”

“O-Okay, well, it is, I guess, but I can see your logic about it, and I’m kind of the one who put you in that position,” Bobby said, inwardly cringing. “That’s… That’s probably one of those communication things we need to work on,” Bobby said.

“Do we?” Daken asked, and his brow knit together in a pained way, eyes still on the floor.

“Well, yeah. I mean, if we’re going to--”

“I made a mistake,” Daken said, and Bobby went silent. “… I was lonely, and I made a mistake.”

“… Oh,” Bobby whispered. He’d known, hadn’t he? Bobby was the one to specifically bring this up; it was the reason he’d refused to do anything more serious last night. So he’d been prepared for this then, right? No, he definitely hadn’t been prepared. “… Okay.”

“… I don’t know… I’m not sure it’s possible to have any ‘real’ relationship that isn’t in the thrall of my powers,” Daken said softly. “Maybe the sorts of relationships conducted through computer screens with people who may be real or may be rogue AIs, but not--”

“Daken, Daken, stop. It’s not your powers,” Bobby protested, because if that’s what made all of this a ‘mistake’, the he was sure as hell going to fight it. “I just said, like, two minutes ago that I was ogling you through a window. Your powers were not in the room with me!”

“That’s a conditioned response,” Daken said, shaking his head. “If the mind is taught to closely associate two stimuli with each other, my presence and my pheromones, then the conditioned response still happens in the absence of the active stimuli.”

“You’re talking about Pavlov to me?” Bobby demanded. “Bullshit. How long did it take Pavlov to train his dogs before they drooled at bells? You’ve only been here a few weeks!”

“Pavlov ran numerous studies for over twenty years. I don’t know what the average length was,”
Daken shook his head. “They weren’t very long though. A few months, maybe.”

“Well I’m a little more complex than a dog, Daken!” Bobby exclaimed.

“It has nothing to do with complexity,” Daken retorted, finally looking up. “When I came here, everything I said made you angry or uncomfortable. That is the kind of dysphoria that happens when someone’s natural feelings are in conflict with what they’re reading in my pheromones. And then a month later suddenly you adore me for no proper reason?”

“Daken, I was attracted to you from minute one,” Bobby protested. “I was angry and uncomfortable because I couldn’t reconcile that with the misconceptions I had of who you were!”

“They weren’t misconceptions!” Daken’s volume rose and his expression got more desperate. “I am a bad person! I’ve always been a bad person! I don’t know how to be anything else, and the only reason I’m trying at all is for my sisters and Zach!”

“That is the best reason to try, Daken!” Bobby said, reaching out, but stopping when Daken took a step back. “And that’s why I can see now that you’re not just a ‘bad person’... And yeah, you’re ridiculously hot, but your face and the way you carry yourself is what hit me that first night, and then I iced up my guts as soon as I recognized you. I was stupidly intimidated by how gorgeous you were and how totally completely confident you seemed. There hasn’t been a moment since I met you that you didn’t turn me on, up close or at a distance... Except when you were a porcupine, that was weird and didn’t do it for me.”

Daken’s eyes flickered away again, and his expression was starting to drift more and more in the direction of panic, but with more emotion painted through it than when he’d gotten freaked out last night. “That… That doesn’t mean…”

“Are you afraid I’m going to build up a tolerance to your pheromones and realize I don’t love you or something?” Bobby asked, some of that panic getting under his own skin.

Daken looked back up sharply, his eyes wide. It took Bobby a few seconds to process why Daken looked so startled. He’d just said the damn L-word. Shit. “… Pheromones aren’t drugs. You don’t build a tolerance,” Daken retorted, not commenting on Bobby’s slip.

“Well, okay. Then that’s a non-issue. But I think it would be anyway,” Bobby said, glancing away for a couple seconds as it became hard to hold Daken’s staring gaze. “I honestly don’t believe that the way I feel about you is because of your powers. That doesn’t make sense to me. Because I didn’t just start crushing on you all of a sudden, I already had. What changed was letting myself admit I’d been wrong about who you were. And so- so that’s not just going to turn off all of a sudden either.”

“What if it’s me?” Daken asked.

“What?” Bobby looked back up at him.

“... What if I realize my feelings aren’t real?” Daken asked, voice going quieter, and he was looking at the floor again. “... I’ve been a whore almost my entire life. I can’t tell when I’m faking it.”

Bobby felt sick. “... I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Daken looked back up, confusion in his eyes. “Sorry?”

“That stuff about your powers, it’s like the thing with Judah was, right?” Bobby asked. “You were
just trying to politely get me to back off? And I’m being pushy?”

“No.” Daken shook his head and then took a step closer, then another. He caught bits of Bobby’s shirt gingerly in his fingers and stepped right up against him, putting his head down on Bobby’s shoulder. “No… I was telling the truth. I don’t know. I don’t know how to know.”

“… I don’t know how to help you,” Bobby whispered.

“You shouldn’t bother,” Daken muttered. “You should just move on. I’m more trouble than I’m worth.”

“You are worth so much more than you seem to think,” Bobby said.

“… I need to talk to Rachel… And Ward, probably,” Daken said quietly. “…”

“It’s okay,” Bobby assured him softly. “I’m not trying to pressure you. Last night was kind of abrupt. I get that. And, I mean, maybe everything for the past week has been pretty abrupt… You need time to think, and that’s totally reasonable.”

“… I don’t know how much time I need,” Daken said, pulling back a few inches. “… You shouldn’t wait.”

“Well I don’t know how much time I’ll need to get over you. So, y’know, check back,” Bobby quipped.

“Drake…” Daken said darkly, taking a step away.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I was-- I was trying to be funny. I wasn’t trying to be a jerk,” Bobby back-pedaled quickly.

Daken bit his lip and nodded, eyes on the floor again. “… I should go,” he said.

“Okay,” Bobby nodded.

Daken turned and took two steps toward the door and then stopped, going still for a moment, before turning back and retracing those steps at twice the speed, putting himself right up in Bobby’s face. “Do you love me?” he asked.

Bobby stared at him for a few seconds, feeling more winded than when Daken had punched him on the stairs. “… Yes,” he whispered.

“Forever?”

Bobby swallowed, heart racing and panic filling his lungs. Would Daken read insecurity or uncertainty as a lie? “When I was a kid I thought love was just forever and that’s how it was. But since then, I’ve watched things I really thought were forever fall apart… I don’t know the future, but I know that what I’m feeling right now isn’t just a crush,” he finally answered.

Daken’s eyes flicked downward and away again. “… Okay,” he nodded, then turned toward the door again, and this time he kept going through it and out and away. Leaving Bobby alone.

Bobby watched the back of the door for a while and then walked over to the couch. He dropped into it and pulled his feet up, leaning sideways against the cushions and closing his eyes. Why did he have to fall for the most complicated person and the most complicated situation in the world? Being a mutant was hard. Being gay was hard. Being a damn teacher was hard. Being in love with
Daken made the rest look like a cake-walk.
Bobby snuck a couple packets of poptarts and a glass of milk from the staff kitchen and returned to his room, then settled himself sideways on the couch. The pillow he’d moved while talking to Judah the previous night was still waiting in its place as he resumed his comforting lounge and pulled out his phone, scrolling through his contact list. He paused for a moment at the Js, then flicked his finger in a quick upswipe and sent it careening down to the Ws. He listened to it ring while he ripped open a poptart packet, freeing one and tossing the other in its mylar down on the cushions when the line picked up.

“Hey Bobby. What’s up?” Warren’s voice answered.

“Are you busy? Do you have to be a CEO right now?” Bobby asked.

“Nope, I finished up CEO duties for the day a few hours ago,” Warren replied. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“I have had the worst, best, worst—” Bobby pulled his phone away from his ear for a moment to check the time, “fifteen hours. I don’t know if I want to vent or whine or get advice or what.”

“Okay, so, I guess for a ballpark, what kind of potential advice would we be talking here?”

“Ughhh, I don’t know… Is it even possible to just have a nice, simple relationship in our fucked up demographic?” Bobby groaned.

“No. It’s not. Never. And you can take my statement as fact or leave it, because I have no relationship advice to give that would be of any use to you ever,” Warren said. “But I am happy to listen to any combination of venting and/or whining. What happened?”

“... I think I fell in love.”

“But?”

“With Daken.”

“... Ohhh,” Warren said, and Bobby could hear the cringe. “... I have not actually met him yet, and if you think you might be in love with him, then obviously I have also been grossly misinformed about his character.”

“Really? Not even considering the possibility that I’m just crazy?” Bobby asked.
“No, I’m the crazy one. You have to get your own schtick, you can’t take mine,” Warren retorted.

“Well okay then,” Bobby said and sighed. “... Daken’s a few different kinds of broken, but he’s been making a major effort to step up and be the person his family needs him to be... And I don’t think he was ever the person he was advertised to be, I think-- I think he fakes ‘scary’ as a defense. With his past, it makes sense. That that’s what he learned, and that it’s what he needed to be to survive.”

“And you think you’re in love with him, so I’m guessing he has some more depth then,” Warren prompted.

“... I should stop saying ‘I think’. That’s just like I’m trying to talk myself out of it,” Bobby said quietly.

“So you know you’re in love with him?”

“Well... It’s a different feeling than crushes I’ve had, or the girls I liked enough that I thought I could make it work,” Bobby said, and then bit his lip a moment. “I mean, I guess maybe I’ve never really been in love for real before, so maybe I’m misreading. But this is new, this is different.”

“And it’s a problem that bears venting or whining about because he’s not interested, or...?”

“The thing where he had to fake ‘scary’ to survive? He didn’t just have to fake it for other people, he had to convince himself,” Bobby explained. “He’s spent his whole life faking his own emotions, not as a performance for the world, as a coping mechanism or something. So he- he says he can’t tell if he’s interested or not because he doesn’t know how to read his own emotions.”

“... Wow... That’s...” Warren was quiet for a few seconds. “I really want to be able to say I don’t understand that.”

“Yeah, I mean, I do. But I think he got it a bit worse than me or you, because he got everything worse than everybody as far as I can tell,” Bobby said, feeling sad and queasy.

“What are you doing on Friday?”

“Friday? I don’t know, what am I doing?”

“I’m in Tokyo right now, but I’ll be getting back to New York Friday afternoon,” Warren explained. “I’m not telling you to postpone this vent-whine, let’s keep going with that, but do you want to do it again in person on Friday?”

“Yeah. That’d be nice,” Bobby said with a tired smile.

“Good. That gives me something to look forward to besides paperwork,” Warren said. “Okay, so do you want to tell me about who Daken really is, or how you went and fell for the guy?”

“Ooh, decisions decisions,” Bobby sighed.

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Daken had just started stacking chairs when the whole lot of them, and the desks, abruptly decided to stack and move themselves. He turned and frowned at Braddock, annoyed that he’d been robbed of a task he could have stretched into at least ten minutes, time he could have simply focused on the rhythm of the movements and thought of nothing else. “You’re early,” he accused.
“I was bored,” Braddock replied.

“Go be bored somewhere else then.”

“You’re in a foul temper today,” Braddock noted, disregarding his ‘request’ and walking into the room.

“That’s none of your concern,” Daken retorted. “The session’s not for twenty minutes. I don’t have to deal with you until then. Go away.”

Braddock kept walking as he glared at her, and finally came to a stop in front of him. “I’m most likely a neutral party to whatever thorn got into your shoe, and you don’t care about my opinions of you,” she noted, putting her right hand on his shoulder and holding the left out expectantly. “If you’d like to spend twenty minutes spitting vitriol at me, it might do you some good.”

Daken glared down at her for a minute, before taking the offered hand and pulling her against his chest. “What puts you in such a generously masochistic mood?” he asked, as the stereo across the room switched on, apparently at Braddock’s behest.

“Masochistic?” Braddock murmured, tilting her head and seeming to consider as they started moving across the floor. “Yes that’s it, I suppose. Masochism. Can you make me feel anything? Pain? Guilt? I ought to feel guilty about X-Force, about you, but the place where such things are supposed to be, I find only a hole. Growing wider inch by inch, day by day.”

“An over-medicated and listless debutante, how utterly unique,” Daken scoffed.

“I haven’t taken anything,” Braddock sighed, letting herself be swept into a dip. “Something was taken from me. And I think perhaps it was the part that’s meant to keep me from hurting people.”

“That sounds like a wonderfully pre-packaged excuse,” Daken sneered.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Braddock sighed. “But I’m a lady of peerage, Daken. Everything good that is given to me I fully deserve by virtue of having been born to title, and everything bad that happens is a tragedy inflicted upon me by a cruel world which has failed to understand my entitlement.”

Daken huffed an almost-chuckle, Braddock’s self-awareness for the grossness of her privilege a somewhat redeeming trait. “How sure are you that ‘something was taken’? There’s a great number of scholarly articles speculating on the hypersusceptibility of telepaths to empathy-exhaustion. Perhaps you’ve simply worn out.”

“And what happens then?”

“Oh well then you go mad.”

“Hmm, perhaps madness will be nice,” Braddock mused. “And then everyone can say it simply runs in the family.”

“Another pre-packaged excuse.”

“Yes.”

They danced wordlessly to the music on the stereo for a few minutes, before Daken broached a question. “How do you manage romances?”

“Not very well, certainly,” Braddock replied.
“But in general,” Daken pressed. “How do you know when the object of your affections is truly returning them and not simply mirroring you? Or when the reverse might be the case?”

“Well, it might have seemed easier during the periods when my telepathy was locked away,” Braddock sighed and shook her head. “But I think that ‘seemed’ truly is the right word. You assume that telepathy should be a major factor in my ability to differentiate true-affection from reciprocal-affection, but that’s a false premise. All of us are predisposed to return affection we are given. We are ‘social animals’.”

“You think your powers don’t throw uncertainty upon the causal chain of such things?” Daken asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Of course. But does it matter?” Braddock asked, tilting her head to look back up at him. “And if so, why?”


“Every lover I’ve had has been well informed of my powers before we ‘got serious’,” Braddock countered. “And if they are informed, and in the event that I don’t control them against their will, why should the sympathetic leakage that tickles at their subconscious be so problematic?” she asked. “Yes, telepathy can have an unfortunate tendency to build overly-potent codependent bonds very quickly, and that can come with its own set of problematic elements, but I like to think we make up for it. After all, sex with a telepath is better.”

Daken chuckled. “And that’s what’s important.”

“Quite,” Braddock nodded. “And I don’t see why this question should even bother you so much. Your pherokinesis is quite pedestrian, all told. I’ve met a pherokinetic omega, you’re not even close.”

Daken bit the inside of his cheek, annoyed by the dismissal of not only his concerns but his effectiveness as well. “And so you suppose that my powers have no effect on the formation of a potential ‘relationship’?” he asked.

“I suppose that you are eerily attractive. So is Benedict Cumberbatch. Get over yourself,” Braddock retorted.

Daken pushed an annoyed huff through his nose. “So then forget about projective powers, what about the receptive side?” he said. “My hearing and olfactory make it impossible to not notice when someone nearby is excited by me. And as you said, it is natural, even instinctive, to reflexively reciprocate such ‘affections’.”

“This is about Bobby then?” Braddock asked.

Daken scoffed loudly.

“He’s peculiarly magnetic,” Braddock said. “I loved him for a week once.”

“For a week?”

“It seemed like three years, but it wasn’t real. The place wasn’t real, the time wasn’t real,” Braddock shook her head. “We were all shoved into an immersive dollhouse with false memories and false lives.”

“Was it some of that Mojo World nonsense?” Daken asked.
“It might as well have been, but no. This was Legion. May he rot in hell,” Braddock sighed. “... But it’s a curious thing... Huddling together under a blanket, holding each other in mutual terror, saying nothing, just crying silently and holding on for the desperate need to hold on... It forms a very unique sort of bond... But one that he rejected, along with all of the experience, after we’d been freed.” She leaned her cheek against Daken’s shoulder and was quiet for a few beats. “I’m not sure if he went for the voluntary erasure of those false memories or not. Some did, some didn’t. We’ve never spoken of it... He doesn’t speak to me much at all beyond weather-chat.”

“... You care about him?”

“Yes,” Braddock agreed. “But we don’t talk. I make him uncomfortable. I’m not sure if it’s because of that fake life, or because of Warren... Either way, it doesn’t really matter.”

Daken considered that for a few steps. “You maintained a relationship with Worthington for several years, right?”

“Wrong. I was in a relationship with him for about a year, then I ended it due to the sort of concerns you’re bringing up now,” Braddock corrected, her voice calm and her feet unfaltering. “And then I was dead for a while. When I came back, Warren was in a relationship with a barely-legal little blonde, and I was only home for about three months before being whisked away to the center of the multiverse.”

“And all that is quite typical for X-Men, isn’t it?”

“Oh yes, that’s Tuesday,” Braddock agreed. “I was gone two years, and during them had a relationship with one of my compatriots in that life. And when I came back, somebody killed me again briefly, then I was brought ‘home’ to Utopia, and Warren and I picked up where we’d left off, I suppose... And then I killed him. And then I violated his psyche to excavate the man I remembered from the place his ego had retreated.” She went quiet for a while; Daken spun her and moved her from the north side of the room to the south before she continued. “I didn’t do it for him, I did it for myself. I did things that can’t and shouldn’t be forgiven... Whether or not Warren could eventually forgive me, I’m sure, I’m quite sure, my co-dependence has gone past the bounds of anything resembling healthy or acceptable.”

“And that kind of co-dependence is a trait of telepaths in love?” Daken asked.

“I think it’s more an example of telepathy exacerbating an underlying neurosis,” Braddock replied, shaking her head. “Like a minor personality disorder or some such. A disease of the mind is communicable when it belongs to a telepath, and of course those most likely to be infected are the ones we spend the most time in mental intimacy with.”

“And what disease do you have?”

Braddock hummed thoughtfully. “I’ve never been diagnosed. Telepaths are notoriously difficult to diagnose... Some form of anxiety disorder, I think... I’ve always hated myself, you know. Now and again I find new things to hate about myself. The things I’ve done to Warren in the last few years, that’s what I hate myself for the most right now.”

Daken considered that for a while. “What was the first reason you hated yourself? Do you remember?”

“I was the stupid one,” Braddock said without needing to think about it. “Did you know my brother has a doctorate? He’s always been brilliant. And I was always not... When you have a twin, it’s impossible to not constantly compare yourself to them.”
“That’s not unique to twins,” Daken said, shaking his head. “Laura’s stronger and better than me in every way... I’m only here, maybe I’m only alive at all, because of her.”

Braddock leaned her cheek against Daken’s shoulder again. “I suppose you make a valid point.”

“Are you done then?” Daken asked. “If things with Worthington went foul because of neuroses you live at the mercy of, then isn’t it logical to assume they’d destroy any other romance you attempted to have?”

“... Warren was never a good match for me, I think. He was a marvelous person to commiserate with,” Braddock sighed dejectedly. “... Being with Victor was uplifting. But Warren, we were just companionably drowning together. It hurt and it sickened, but in an addictive way.”

“And this ‘Victor’? He’s not a possibility?”

“He’s dead.”

“Ah.”

They danced in silence for a minute, before Braddock spoke again in a murmur. “The mentally ill do find love, Daken.”

“Well that seems rather irresponsible of them,” Daken scoffed.

“It’s more responsible than turning in on themselves until they snap, and then sending out a lot of mail-bombs or something,” Braddock retorted. “In favorable pairings, we can buttress each other’s weaknesses.”

“And what if--”

Daken cut his query off as the door opened and Deeds and Abbot came spilling in. They faltered slightly as they saw Daken and Braddock dancing. “Are- Are we late?” Deeds asked uncertainly.

“I can’t be bothered to check,” Daken shrugged.

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Bobby had been sleepwalking all day. During his math-9 class, his students had started yelling for his attention to inform him that the lecture had dissolved into incomprehensible babble only tangentially related to algebra. Twice. Talking to Warren had calmed some of his feelings of quiet despair, but didn’t actually offer any help or input toward the situation. Bobby still wasn’t sure if he was being patient and encouraging with Daken’s insecurities, or pressuring him like a creep who can’t hear ‘no’.

Johnny and Gambit had both seemed to think that Daken did want a relationship, and that Bobby was in the running; but were they just talking from a biased viewpoint where ‘domestic bliss’ was the end-goal of everything anyone does? Johnny and Gambit were both sentimentalists, Daken was coolly analytical to a fault, and Bobby should probably be asking advice from somebody a bit more pragmatic. Somebody who understood the way Daken’s mood-swings worked with somewhat more in-depth knowledge than simply that they were a thing. And after trying her office and wandering around the usual staff hangouts, Bobby made his way down the dorm hall to Rachel’s door and knocked.

“Hey, anybody home? It’s Bobby?” he called.
A few seconds later there was the sharp click of the bolt releasing and a voice calling from inside, “Come in.”

Bobby pushed the door open and walked into Rachel’s little living room where he paused and raised an eyebrow, giving the door a nudge to shut it. “You’re painting each other?” he asked, looking curiously down at Rachel and Kitty seated on the floor, with a towel covering the rug between them and a glass of dirty water, a few brushes, and some trays of cake-paint scattered over the coffee table. The girls were both sporting multicolored abstract patterns over their bare arms and faces.

“What’s it to ya?” Kitty raised an eyebrow back at him.

“That’s weirdly adorable.”

“So’s your face,” Kitty retorted.

“Did you come to get that face painted, or did you need something else?” Rachel asked, eyeing him.

“That depends, can you make me a tiger?” Bobby asked, pointing at his cheek.

“Absolutely. Sit down, decide if you want Bengal or Siberian, and tell me why you’re wearing anxiety like a boa constrictor,” Rachel said, patting the floor.

“That is some amazing service. I’m giving you a five-star review.” Bobby settled down cross-legged. “Bengal, please.”

Kitty stood up and grabbed the glass of murky water off the coffee table. “I’m going to change this,” she announced, carrying it over to the bathroom and running the sink.

“So?” Rachel asked, rearranging the trays of paint and picking up one with two shades of orange in it. “You’re more stressed than your usual stressed.”

“I am getting so many mixed-signals from various people. Maybe I should try spread-sheeting them, but I don’t have enough data to analyze, and I don’t think it would help much if I did,” Bobby sighed, wrinkling his nose and looking down at the towel on the floor.

“And I assume this is about Daken?” Rachel asked, reaching for a brush as Kitty returned and set the glass of water back down on the table.

“You assume correctly,” Bobby agreed.

Rachel nodded, pursing her lips and swishing the head of her brush through the water before shaking it off and swirling it in the brighter orange paint. “Most of the things Daken tells me, he does so with the expectation of confidence,” she said.

“Yeah, yeah I get that,” Bobby nodded and then held still as she reached toward his face with the brush. “I’m not looking for any anecdotes or anything, just… kind of advice, help on interpreting… tone?”

“More specifically?” Rachel asked, the brush making cool trails across Bobby’s cheek as her wrist moved.

“I’m not sure if he’s maybe trying to tell me to back off and just doesn’t know how,” Bobby said quietly. “Like, this morning he went into this long thing about his powers and how he can’t always
tell when he’s influencing someone, and, I mean, like it kind of distilled down to him saying he’s a problem for me and- and I was talking to Johnny this weekend, and he said that’s the same way Daken kept trying to distance himself from him… Like his version of ‘go away’ is the ‘it’s not you it’s me’ speech… Is that what’s happening? Is he trying to get me to leave him alone?”

Rachel blew out a long sigh and chewed on the corner of her lip for a minute. “… I don’t know,” she finally said. “It’s hard to tell. He’s been centering a lot of anxiety around you since he’s been here. At first it was split almost fifty-fifty between Logan-based anxiety and the things that you said or did… but the last two weeks I think he’s been a lot more focused on you.”

“But is he just anxious because I’m bothering him?” Bobby asked.

“Not… in a harassment way,” Rachel said slowly, frowning as she stared at her brush moving across Bobby’s face. “Daken grew up without attachments, and he’s afraid of them now. He’s afraid of getting attached to things that can be taken away from him.”

“So… He wants me to back off because he doesn’t think I’m serious?” Bobby asked. “This morning he was talking about how maybe I’m just addicted to his powers.”

“In the specific circumstances, that actually happening seems very unrealistic,” Rachel said. “But something I could realistically see Daken being paranoid about.”

“Daken’s pheromone powers are mid-level. Stronger than average, but not overpowering,” Kitty noted, leaned sideways against the coffee table with her chin propped on an elbow. “If someone had a really addictive personality, they could potentially get psychologically-addicted to him, but I think that would take a lot of exposure, like probably spending fifty percent of their time really close to him or in small, poorly ventilated rooms with him, over at least a few months.”

“Right. It’s unlikely,” Rachel agreed. “When Daken cranks up his output to high, he has about as much influence as a strong alcohol. Combined with a skill-set for manipulation, if he’s working someone he can get them to make stupid decisions. As a tool or weapon, it’s good for espionage, bad for direct assaults.”

“And as a complication for relationships?” Bobby asked.

Rachel was quiet for a minute, painting his forehead. “… There’s no reason his powers would necessarily hamper a relationship in and of themselves,” she said quietly.

“In and of themselves?”

Rachel bit her lip for a moment. “We’re getting a little into subject matter that I don’t have a right to talk to you about.”

Kitty frowned, tapping a fingernail against the top of the coffee table. “Do we know how old he was when he manifested?” she asked.

“Gambit said ‘too young’.” Bobby glanced sideways at her with his eyes, while keeping his head still.

“So…” Kitty’s frown deepened and she stared at the paint-water. “… So how young is ‘too young’ to be walking around leaking ‘want me’ vibes everywhere, and what happens to a ‘too young’ kid who is doing exactly that, probably without much control over it at first?”

“… Oh God,” Bobby whispered, further disturbed by Rachel’s resolute non-reaction to Kitty’s question; her expression stayed a practiced blank as she stared at her brush and kept painting
A few minutes of silence crept by, before Kitty spoke up again. “Did you ever read that ‘Mutant Voices’ magazine the little publishing house in Alphabet City was putting out for a couple years before M-Day?” she asked.

“I- I picked up a copy once, but I didn’t finish reading it. I couldn’t, it was… painful,” Bobby said.

“I read all of it,” Kitty said. “I’ve got my old copies in a box, and I put in when they did a Kickstarter to re-release the whole series in digital format… I think I’ve probably read every issue at least ten times, and I still reread a few articles every week.” She bit her lip for a minute, staring down at the table with her brow furrowed. “…I think there were about half a dozen ‘my life’ write-in articles from empaths, pherokinetics and that kind of thing… Most of them were pretty much identical. Sexually abused, leading to either formal or informal sex-work. And obviously we’ve known a few who were abusers by the time we met them… but I have to wonder how much of that might be the whole ‘cycle of abuse’ thing.”

“... And the ones like Josette or Lorelei,” Bobby whispered. “... It’s really easy to write them off as slutty when you can only see the end result.”

Kitty sighed. “It’s been… implied that Daken was a professional honeypot for a lot of years,” she said quietly. “You don’t just casually send in a CV to get that job. And if he was ‘too young’, then I kind of doubt Daken was the one who made the decision that that’s the career he was going to be groomed for.”

Bobby swallowed hard and closed his eyes. “I just-- I shouldn’t be messing with him, should I? If that’s what he’s coming from--”

“Are you making the assumption that a rape victim is incapable of ever thereafter consenting to sex?” Rachel asked, washing her brush in the glass and starting to paint him with brown-orange. “That someone who has been abused can never overcome their past and rise above it to live a full life? If so, why is Daken even here?”

“No,” Bobby protested, frustration and annoyance raking at him. “But I can’t read him well enough to know when something I’m doing is hurting him. He needs somebody more sensitive than me.”

“I don’t know, you’re pretty damn ‘sensitive’ when he’s trolling you,” Kitty snorted, shaking her head.

Bobby gave a miserable sigh. “I tried to talk to him about this, sort of… He went into a monologue about how we’re just animals and biology is everything, yadda yadda yadda.”

“Applying supervillain-logic to everyday situations. That’s not at all worrying.” Kitty made a face. “Daken likes to distance himself from trauma by claiming it wasn’t traumatic. He’s just as flippant with all of the horror stories in his personal history,” Rachel shrugged. “Drawing strength from denial.”

“... That doesn’t work.”
“Of course it doesn’t. But everybody tries it now and again, don’t they,” Rachel replied dismissively.

“So do you have any kind of advice or direction for me here?” Bobby asked.

Rachel shrugged. “Wash your face before you go. I’m only moderately better at advice than I am at tigers. This is going to be an embarrassment.” she said. “... But don’t try to decide for him what Daken can or can’t feel about you. You are not the love police. You don’t get to let your anxieties invalidate his emotions anymore than he gets to call yours a simple reaction to his powers.”

“Well… that’s something, I guess,” Bobby sighed. “Thank you.”

“I’m serious though, you should definitely wash this off before you go outside. I can’t tell if I’m making you a tiger or a jack o’lantern.”

Chapter End Notes

In the course of writing I will run over to the Fandom.com wiki a lot and look stuff up. While I was writing this one, I checked up on various stats-grids a couple times and got annoyed with them. Stats-grids are sort of configured like some kind of RPG stats, and get published in the 'pedias Marvel will put out usually around an event, and so there's three major problems with these being the 'official' stats for characters:

1. A lot of the time these stats will be published before the character has actually really been in the books in any significant way, and apparently without much communication between the team compiling the 'pedia and the writer on the book-in-progress, so you can have distinct mismatches between the traits a new character is written with and what is reflected in their stats-grid. Sometimes it's not even new characters, sometimes established characters are listed in the 'pedias with completely erroneous traits. Logan's never been written with 'superhuman strength', he's been written as 'a pretty fucking burly dude', which is something that has a category, 'peak human'. So why has Logan been instead listed in the same strength category as Peter Parker?

2. Sometimes the people working on a new 'pedia don't bother to review the older 'pedias to see how a similar power-type has been rated before. Laurie Collin's pherokinetisk power was listed in her stats-grid under the 'energy projection' stat, and we can argue about how legitimate that might be, but it was done, and then later when Daken was listed in a 'pedia, his stats-grid didn't include his powers at all beyond his healing factor being reflected in his 'durability' rating.

3. They don't update these 'pedia listings much, if at all. Bobby's official stats-grid still reflects the way Bobby was using his powers circa 2000, and that is super out of date to what he is doing now. In his narrative for about the last eight years, 'durability' and 'strength' should be completely maxed out, and his speed should probably have a max-out-modifier (like they have with teleporters) with a footnote specifying that he can be in multiple places at once. Also, with his starting-age in X-Men #1 having been recently retconned to 12, that means Bobby graduated high school high school and started college when he was 13 or 14. Add a notch to his intelligence stat, guys, because that's impressive.
“Is it reasonable to categorize these concerns as ‘anxieties’?” Ward asked.

Daken frowned softly, looking up at him. “You tell me.”

“I believe it makes a good shorthand and an umbrella under which to analyze them,” Ward replied. “But I want you to understand that when I use that word, I’m not using it to remove any validity from them as possibilities. I’m not saying that they’re a product of neurosis, because they’re not. I’m using the word as meaning something that you feel a long-term, non-acute but legitimate fear about.”

“Your tactful disclaimer is acknowledged,” Daken retorted.

“Can we make a list? Or a sort of chart?” Ward asked, turning in his chair and picking up a clipboard and a pen from his desk.

“Is it going in the shredder at the end of this session?” Daken asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Unless you decide you want to keep it.”

“Shredder.” Daken moved from being sprawled languidly against the backrest to leaning on the arm of the couch, weight shifted forward, watching.

“All right, so,” Ward said, balancing the clipboard against his knee and scrawling on the top and then midway down the steno-pad, notations segregated to the right and left. “You’re feeling anxiety that his feelings about you might not be genuine, and you’re also feeling anxiety that your feelings about him might not be genuine.”

“Yes,” Daken agreed, fighting against the urge to regard this exercise as pointless pedantry.

“Focusing on his feelings for a moment,” Ward said, tapping the left side of the page. “Why would they not be genuine? What are the potential factors that would have lead to the development of artificial feelings and to him believing that they’re real?”

“My powers,” Daken replied.

“Is that all?” Ward challenged, writing it on the upper left quadrant of the page. “Are there any other factors?”

Daken considered, sucking his bottom lip in, running his tongue over it, then biting for a second or two. “Him being so fresh out of the closet,” he said. “He spent half his life trying to make himself like women, make himself not look at men. It’s a timing issue. I’m the first out, pretty and not-married queer man he had a face-to-face with since coming to terms… He got excited.”

“That’s a reasonable thing to question,” Ward agreed, adding another note. “Anything else?”

“... Raven,” Daken said softly, eyes drifting to the wall, unfocused. “He showed an interest in a very well known known manipulator in the past... such that it seems more like an interest in being manipulated... Because letting someone control you is... comfortingly simple... I’m a manipulator...”
“and everyone knows it.”

“So attraction to a condition. Anything else?”

Daken stared at the wall and tried to sift through the shifting sands of thought.

“We can add more later if something comes to mind,” Ward said, and moved his hand down the page. “So then, if his feelings _were_ false, what would be the potential consequences?”

“He wakes up,” Daken said simply, shrugging.

“And then?” Ward pressed.

“And then…” Daken frowned and bit his lip again.

After a minute, Ward asked, “Are you afraid he’d physically hurt you again?”

“… No.”

“Daken, we’re shredding this at the end of the session,” Ward reminded him quietly. “It doesn’t matter if it’s a longshot, the fear is still legitimate because it’s been formed by your experiences. Many anxieties that people commonly have are of things that would be extremely unlikely. Plane crashes, asteroid strikes, brain embolisms. The statistical probability of those things happening is infinitesimal, but the fear is still legitimized by the fact it _has_ happened to somebody before and will probably happen to somebody again. Your anxieties have a much stronger and more personal foundation than that. Your first confrontation with Bobby was violent, and you’ve also had many experiences of being hurt by other people.”

“ _Fine. Yes_ ,” Daken said through gritted teeth, glaring at the corner of Ward’s desk. “I’m afraid of fucking up and having another _Donna_ situation.”

Ward scribbled on his steno-pad, and then asked, “Besides being physically hurt, what other negative outcomes could occur if Bobby’s feelings aren’t real?”

The objects in front of Daken’s eyes turned into meaningless colors and shapes, representative of nothing. The momentary surge of annoyance he’d felt a moment earlier faded as faint nausea replaced it. “… He feels raped.”

“Alright,” Ward said impassively, writing it down. “And?”

“ _What_ and?” Daken snapped, his stomach twisting. “You think that’s so utterly casual that there there’s a lower bar?”

“We’re not trying to put these in order of magnitude, just brainstorm a few alternate possibilities,” Ward replied. “What else could happen?”

Daken swallowed, fingernails digging into the upholstery. “… If I let myself need him, and then he’s gone,” he whispered.

“Alright. Anything else?”

“Everybody turns on me for it.”

“Allright,” Ward wrote it and then shifted. “Let’s talk about the other side now. Why might _your_ feelings not be real?”
“... I don’t know how to have feelings,” Daken said, swallowing again, trying to force the nausea away.

“So a lack of experience, paralleling Bobby’s,” Ward noted, writing. “Your lack of experience with interpersonal relationships versus his lack of experience with his sexuality. What else?”

“I’m a whore. I learned to mirror the desires I can smell on the people around me. I learned to do it automatically, without thinking, without questioning it,” Daken answered.

“Alright. What else?”

The nausea crept up on him again, stronger. Daken bit down on his lip and his fingers gripped the armrest hard. He felt a slight tremor starting in that hand and working its way into the rest of him as he stared straight ahead, seeing nothing.

“Daken?”

The smell in the air shifted, picked up the slightest hint of oil and spice. Daken blinked rapidly and turned his eyes to look at Ward. A frown was on his brow the corner of his cheek was tightened with effort; silver kept flickering through his hair, just at the ends.

“Daken?” he called again, strain in his voice.

“... He flattened Thor,” Daken whispered. “... During his deathseed episode a few years ago, somebody Youtubed a cell phone video of a fight that went down in the street. He swats Thor like a mosquito, and Thor doesn’t get up... He’s stronger than a god.”

Ward nodded and swallowed, before replying with forced calm, “And he could protect you from one. Anything else?”

Daken gritted his teeth hard, a surge of anger cutting through the nausea and panic. “Anything else?” he growled, narrowing his eyes.

“I’d like to finish the list before we take a deeper dive on the specifics,” Ward said, glancing up at him. He’d relaxed slightly, no longer having to fight to hold his own form.

“Nothing else. That’s all,” Daken sneered, looking away again.

“Okay. And what are the potential repercussions if your feelings turn out to be non-genuine?” Ward asked.

Daken huffed out a harsh breath and shook his head. “I leave him. He hates me. Everyone hates me. Laura hates me, Rachel hates me, Gambit hates me.”

“What else?” Ward asked, writing it down.

“I can’t leave him.”

“Alright. Anything else?”

“Well I suppose I could kill myself to get out of it. That about covers all my what-if bases,” Daken snapped.

“That sounds like more of a solution than a consequence. A bad solution,” Ward said with a small shake of his head and then pulled the top sheet off of the steno pad and held it out to Daken.
Daken frowned, taking the sheet of paper as Ward deposited the clipboard and pen back on the desk. His eyes scanned down what Ward had written.

On the left:

**BOBBY**

- pheromone influence
- inexperience - sexual
- desire to be controlled
- **FALSE POSITIVE**
- retaliation
- feelings of rape
- abandonment
- alienation

On the right:

**DAKEN**

- inexperience - emotional
- paroting
- need for protection
- **FALSE POSITIVE**
- alienation
- feeling trapped

On the last line at the bottom left corner of the page, there was just a name: *Donna*.

“First, maybe we should talk about the most immediate parallel between the two lists,” Ward said, folding his hands on his lap. “You’re both inexperienced with ‘real’ relationships. And that could be considered a problematic factor, in the same way that it is for teenagers. They hurt each other often in their romances because they’re just learning how to navigate that kind of relationship,” he continued. “But the other possibility here would be having a relationship with somebody who is on a significantly different experience level than yourself, and I’m not sure that would be less problematic.”

“You think that hurting each other is better?” Daken asked, glancing up at him briefly then back down at the lists.

“I think that hurting each other sometimes is something that happens in relationships. Every kind of relationship,” Ward replied calmly. “And I think the way you navigate it when you have hurt each other, or try to avoid potential pitfalls before they happen, is by keeping a dialogue open and doing your best to communicate with each other.”

Daken pursed his lips for a moment. “... So you’re saying that that’s a stupid anxiety.”

“No.” Ward shook his head. “It’s definitely not a stupid thing to worry about, it’s a realistic fear, it’s an actual reality. I guess what I’m saying... is that I think this element has a neutral value. Yes, it’s probably going to be a tension factor at least once and probably a few times within a potential relationship, but I don’t think that it’s something you should let stop you.”

Daken bit his lip for a moment, then licked it, and looked back up at Ward. “Fine. Next then?”

“Okay,” Ward agreed softly and took a breath, eyes wandering to the side for a moment as he considered. “I think some of the causes you’ve listed pair to corresponding repercussions, and in
those cases it would be useful to talk about them in tandem.”

“Fine.”

Ward nodded, looking back to his eyes and having the placidity of a still lake. “So, I would think that the fear of some kind of retaliation or the fear that Bobby could feel raped are both stemming directly from a possibility of his feelings being significantly under the influence of your powers. Does that sound right to you?”

Daken was silent for a minute, staring blankly at the paper. “... Yes.”

“Bobby has been aware of your powers since before the two of you even met,” Ward pointed out. “And I know that you’ve made some efforts to shield him from the stronger side of it. Even if your methods haven’t been consistently appropriate--”

“I never said that punching him was ‘appropriate’, I just said that I did it,” Daken snapped.

“I know, but just for a point of reference, I want to compare that incident to this morning’s conversation,” Ward said quickly, before his tone and measure smoothed out again. “You had a similar concern both times, you were worried that he could be, or was being, strongly influenced by your pheromones. The first time, you refused to explain what the issue was because, I think, correct me if I’m wrong, your powers are of a fairly intimate nature and that makes talking about them to someone with whom you haven’t established a rapport uncomfortable.”

Daken had had his lip pinched between his teeth as Ward spoke; he reluctantly let it go to reply. “... Maybe. I didn’t really talk about them with anybody but Romulus for my entire life up until a few years ago,” he said. “My father could smell them, so the pretense of that power being a secret evaporated then. But it still wasn’t something I… had in-depth conversations about… Until Johnny.”

“Because you felt it was important for Johnny to understand the nature of your powers, and the influence they could have on a potential partner, before establishing a more intimate relationship with him,” Ward murmured.

Daken shrugged, dropping the list on his lap and turning his head to stare at the wall.

“And Bobby already knew that you were a pherokinetic, so there was never a need for you to inform him of their existence in general terms, but it seems like with this morning’s conversation you felt that it was important for him to understand the intricacies better,” Ward said, his voice lilting up slightly at the end, not quite the tone of a question, but certainly prompting a response.

“... The first time, at the Meantime, he called it ‘charm’,” Daken noted quietly, and then his lip and nose twitched up into a sneer. “So blitheringly simplistic.”

“Right, and so you wanted him to understand that because of the only semi-voluntary nature of your powers, it’s a much more complex issue,” Ward said encouragingly. “And that conversation, taking the time and making the effort to communicate that to him explicitly, was very important for two reasons. Firstly, because a lot of the conflicts you and Bobby have been having seem to stem from the fact that you’re trying to communicate on two different wavelengths and misinterpreting each other. And second, because you are taking responsibility every way you can for the problematic aspects of your powers. You’ve given him all the information he needs to make a well informed decision.” Ward took a breath, bit his lip for half a second, and then added, “Does that mean that understanding and reason cancels out your powers? No. But it means that he understands, on an intellectual level at the very least, how your powers could be affecting him, and
that puts his personal agency on the issue in his hands.”

“And so that solves it all?” Daken scoffed.

“To a certain extent,” Ward tilted his head and didn’t quite shrug. “I think that if Bobby did, at some later date, come to believe that his feelings for you had never been genuine, then because of the efforts you’ve taken to explain the ensnaring aspects of your powers, and also taking the time to explain how classical conditioning can work in concert with them, I don’t think Bobby could reasonably see you as having actively manipulated him into his feelings.”

Daken’s eyes shifted back to the paper laying on his thigh. “… And if being manipulated into it is what he wants?”

“And why might he want that? Why might he believe that it would make for a simpler relationship?”

“… A safety net,” Daken murmured. “It’s because of Summers.”

“Which one?”

“Scott Summers. He was Drake’s disenchantment,” Daken said, leaning back a little bit to take a deeper breath and sigh it out through his nose. “Drake kept watching his big brother figure fall out of love with his wives, and that’s what broke his Disneyesque perception of romance. Because Summers is the three-to-five years type… Drake wants a lifetime warranty. But he’s not worried about a lover losing interest in him, he’s worried he’ll fall out of love like Summers always did.”

Ward nodded slowly. “So then he might see your powers as a guarantee that he’d never lose physical interest in you?”

“Doesn’t it sound possible?” Daken glanced up at him.

“Everything we wrote on the list sounds possible,” Ward said, looking him back in the eye. “But at the same time we acknowledge that, it’s vital to also acknowledge that ‘possible’ is not equal to ‘probable’. Where the possibility of resentment relies on the possibility of Bobby taking an unreasonable backward view of the potential relationship, this possibility relies on a premise of Bobby being deep into feelings of paranoia and inadequacy for his own emotional capacity.”

“And that’s not realistic?”

Ward pursed his lips and studied Daken for a minute. “Is it?”

“You’re the one who knows what everybody’s afraid of,” Daken replied.

Ward’s eyes cast downward and there was a tiny flash of tongue as he wet his lip, then stillled for a few moments, expression unreadable, scent not quite human enough to read. Finally his eyes came back up to meet Daken’s again. “I think you should have a conversation with him about that. Express that it’s something you’re concerned about, and ask him to take some time with himself to seriously consider it. If… If he also believes that it might be a primary motivator for him, then… I think a longer discussion would be in order.”

“A longer discussion,” Daken huffed, looking away. “Why would that not be an instant kill-switch?”

“Maybe it would,” Ward replied, with a slight shrug. “But maybe we should compare it to the concern you had on your side of the chart, about the possibility of seeing Bobby as a protector. Is
the desire for an attractive partner on a similar level to the desire for a strong one?"

Daken dropped himself against the backrest, letting his head fall back and glaring up at the ceiling. “... Through nearly all of history, in all of the world, the primary criteria by which a woman or her parents sought a husband for her was measured in his potential as a protector.”

Ward was quiet for a minute. “That being the role of a husband? Are constructed gender roles a factor?”

Daken lifted his head, transferring his glare from the ceiling to Ward. “What?”

“It—”

“Nobody brought up gender!” Daken snapped. “I used marriage as an example of romantic partnership!”

Ward stared impassively back at him and nodded. “Okay. Your example just seemed one-dir—”

“My example was historical. As in eight thousand years of hetero-marriage history versus about ten of queer-marriage,” Daken growled at him.

“Okay.” Ward nodded again. “So then wh—”

“I’m a bitch, okay?” Daken snarled. “Is that some kind of problem?”

“No,” Ward answered calmly, maintaining unwavering eye contact. “But I’d like to clarify: is that something you see as one of your roles in a potential relationship? To be protected?”

Daken stared at him silently for a minute, then swallowed, blinked a few times, and looked away. He brushed the piece of paper off his lap and shifted, pressing himself into the corner of the couch and picking his feet up off the floor, he drew his knees up to his chest, hugging his legs. He stayed silent a few more minutes, staring at nothing. “... I don’t know... Is that wrong?”

“No. Like you said, to be protected by one’s partner has been a very common desire throughout human history,” Ward said, soothingly calm and unaffected. “And not just human, many species. I’m not sure I could be so bold as to say ‘most’, but certainly many.”

Daken swallowed again and leaned his head forward, resting his face against his knees. He stayed quiet.

“Do you need a minute?” Ward asked. “Do you want some water?”

“No,” Daken said softly. “What’s the next thing?”

“Do you agree that your anxiety about the possibility of mimicking Bobby’s emotions is in some ways analogous to the possibility of him being overly affected by your pheromones?” Ward asked.

Daken considered that for a minute. “... Maybe analogous, but not the same.”

“Of course.”

“You say... ‘overly’, ‘strongly’, ‘significantly’... You’re not debating that my pheromones are affecting him to some degree,” Daken said quietly.

Ward was quiet for a moment; Daken could hear him swallow and shift his weight on the chair. “Your neutral pheromones are attractive, that’s a fact... Your face, figure and voice also meet high
aesthetic standards… You are an attractive person, Daken. That is a reality, and it affects how people react to you.”

Daken bit his lip for a few seconds. “On a scale of one to ten, how problematic is that?”

“If it’s acknowledge, I don’t think it has to be problematic at all,” Ward replied. “And I think both you and Bobby are aware and acknowledging of it.”

“He’s as much,” Daken said quietly. “Most people can’t fully appreciate it. There’s a smell thing. His scent is… out of the park.”

“So you’re a pair of tens,” Ward said, voice taking on a momentary, flippant lilt. “They say statistically, people tend to settle down with someone in their own league.”

Daken closed his eyes and sighed.

“But, on that point, if you can pinpoint valid, quantifiable reasons to be attracted to him, does that debunk the theory that you’re only mimicking?” Ward asked.

Daken frowned behind his knees, brow furrowing. “… Can’t it be part of it though?”

“It usually is. People like being liked, Daken,” Ward said. “If it’s not the entire basis for your feelings, then being flattered by attention is a normal response.”

Daken swallowed, lifting his head a little and staring straight ahead, eyes unfocused.

After a few minutes of silence, Ward started talking again. “On both sides of the chart, you expressed anxiety about being ostracized in the event of a breakup,” he said too calmly. “First, I want to say that that is a logical and very common fear to have, and in some circles it does happen. But, for this social circle and the hypothetical future in which that might happen for you, maybe we could consider Kitty’s recent… rather dramatic breakup.”

Daken frowned again. “Pryde is well established, well liked. There’s no comparison.”

“She left her fiance at the alter,” Ward said. “And while having an existential panic-attack in the form of cold feet can be sympathetic, and it’s definitely better than filing for divorce two weeks later… it still ranks pretty high on the ‘shitty ways to end it’ scale.”

Daken bit down on his lip and dug his fingernails into the fabric of his jeans as his stomach twisted.

“Nobody hates Kitty. Everybody feels awkward and sad and uncomfortable about all of it, but they don’t hate her. And Illyana is still her best friend, and that’s pretty significant under the circumstances,” Ward said calmly and drew a breath, not quite a sigh. “If you tried with Bobby and things didn’t work out, Laura wouldn’t hate you. And I don’t think anybody you love would hate you for it unless you decided to break up with Bobby by doing something violent or illegal-levels of cruel, so… don’t? That sounds simplistic, but it kind of is.” He paused a moment, his weight shifted in the chair, leaning a bit more against the backrest. “… I realize that meaningful interpersonal relationships and how to not hurt people is something you’re still working on figuring out, so if you reached a point where you felt that you needed to end a relationship, then you could come to me and we’d figure out how you should have that conversation.”

Daken swallowed against a tightness in his throat and blinked several times. “… Okay,” he whispered.
“On one side of the chart we had a fear of abandonment and on the other we had a fear of being trapped,” Ward said softly. “I kept those for last, and to address together, because we’re not going to solve them in this session. Nothing I can possibly say today, and nothing I can help you unpack right now, is going to make you just ‘get over’ them.”

Daken stayed still and quiet, but turned his eyes to look at Ward.

“Those anxieties didn’t start with Bobby. They have very deep roots, and they’re going to be with you for years,” Ward said, looking back, his eyes holding gravity but still perfect calm. “They may be with you for the rest of your life, Daken... But if we continue to work on them, then they will get smaller, and it will get easier to keep them from stopping you living your life.”

Daken looked down, swallowing again. “… Okay.”

“… Do you want to talk about Donna tod--”

“No.”

“Okay,” he said with the placid tone of a digital assistant.

Chapter End Notes

This one was really hard to get started on. I tried several times over the past few months, and ended up just writing a paragraph and then discarding it. Last week De_Borah gave me a poke that I read before going to bed, and then woke up on Saturday morning being like "I want to write that scene!" and it kind of just all flowed out really suddenly. I don't think this is even really the conversation I'd had loosely planned for it last spring, but I'm pleased with what it ended up being.
“Pshh. Bubbleman, you pansy. The shrimps are tougher than you,” Bobble muttered, clicking away at his Switch as he lounged on the couch. “Giving a bad name to H2O-themed super dudes…”

There was a knock on the door and he paused the game, then went still for a moment as a tiny thrill of panic tore through him. Who would be on the other side? He really wished they’d announce themself. And he was taking way too long on this unreasonable little freakout. Bobby dropped his Switch onto the cushions and rolled off the couch, clamoring to his feet, and stumbled over to the door. He opened it to find Daken waiting on the other side. Bobby’s heart skipped, and before Daken could say anything he found himself blurting, “Do you want to get dinner?”

Daken stopped with his mouth halfway open, derailed. The blank neutrality of the rest of his face and the slight widening of his eyes had Bobby cringing inwardly almost immediately. And the pause stretched out way too long, entering deer-in-headlights territory.

“I mean, because... it’s about that time, and…” Bobby floundered, panic deepening. “Sorry,” he whispered.

“... I want to ask you a question,” Daken said softly, coming unstuck. “But I don’t want you to answer it. Not tonight. Not tomorrow. I want you to think about it for a while.”

“O-Okay,” Bobby stammered, stomach clenching.

Daken’s gaze lowered, shifted to the side a little, and he wet his lip. “… Are you afraid that you’re like Scott Summers?” he asked in a voice just above a whisper. “Are you afraid you’d have difficulty maintaining any long-term relationship because you’d... get bored, or drift away, or whatever his reasons were for his inability to stick it out more than a couple of years at a time?” He swallowed and bit his lip for a moment before glancing up, his brow pinched. His voice went even quieter as he finished, “... Does some part of you, in the back of your head, see in my powers an extended warranty for your interest?”

Bobby felt nauseous and angry. He wanted to defend Scott. He wanted to defend himself. He wanted to be righteously indignant that Daken could even wonder. He wanted to, but underneath the anger was a sudden and absolute terror. Why was that question so infuriating and so terrifying? Did the visceral gut-punch of it mean that it had already been lurking somewhere in his ignore-me thoughts? Bobby opened his mouth, drawing a breath.

Daken’s hand shot out, covering Bobby’s mouth quickly but gently. “Don’t answer. Not right now,” Daken reminded.

Bobby clenched his teeth and turned his eyes away; he found himself blinking quickly, a knot
rising in his throat. Daken’s hand withdrew. Bobby swallowed and took a slightly difficult breath. “... Dinner?” he asked again in a whisper.

Daken was quiet for a moment; when Bobby looked at him again, he saw a pinched brow and slightly hunched shoulders. “... I have questions to think about too,” Daken said, not looking back at him.

Bobby reached out and caught his hands. “Like what?” he asked softly.

“How do I distinguish desire for a person from desire for what that person could give me?” Daken asked.

“I- I don’t have anything,” Bobby said, frowning in confusion.

“... Security,” Daken said, and swallowed before clarifying, “You’re stronger than a god. You could protect me if... when...” He closed his eyes. “And you’re the last of the ‘original five’ still alive and full-timing it. You’re royalty. If I belonged to you, nobody could push me out... Not even Logan.”

Bobby took a step, and he was pulling Daken into a hug before he realized he’d even made the decision to do it. He stared blankly across the hall, not seeing it, and didn’t say anything for a couple of minutes as he felt Daken’s arms hesitantly respond. Bobby wondered, did Daken live in a constant state of fear? Was every snap and blip of attitude a bubble of panic rising to the surface? “... I’ll protect you,” he whispered. Daken’s face pressed into his shoulder and a small tremor went through him as he clung. “... Even if you don’t want to- to go forward with this thing, I’ll still protect you... So then... you don’t have to worry about whether you’re only in it for ‘security’, ’cause I’ll protect you no matter what you decide.”

Daken made a strange little sound in the back of his throat, then swallowed and lifted his head a little. “You believe that...” he whispered. “I’m too much of a nihilist to believe in unconditional things. Least of all ‘unconditional love’. Love is the very last thing that should be unconditional.”

Bobby frowned. His first instinct was to argue; instead he asked, “Why?”

“... For children, towards children, it’s fine, it’s good,” Daken said softly. “But between adults? If one should love ‘unconditionally’, then it would follow that one should forgive and excuse a loved one for anything... Abuse.”

Bobby considered that for a moment. “Okay. I can meet you halfway there,” he murmured. “ ‘Don’t abuse me’ is a good condition to have... But thinking that somebody has to have sex with me to be part of my life isn’t.”

“... Pryde and McCoy and Gray are ‘part of your life’,” Daken said quietly. “But they don’t belong to you.”

Bobby drew a breath to respond and then paused as an uncomfortable thought struck him, and he tried to decide whether or not there was subtext in Daken’s word-choice. He shifted, cupping Daken’s jaw and leaning away enough to look at him. “... Daken, I don’t ever want to own you,” he whispered.

Daken met his eyes for a second and then looked away. “... What if I want to be owned? It’s rather forgone by now that I’m inugami. Any attempt at denial has only gotten me hurt.”

“I- I don’t know what that is.”
“It’s what I am.”

“Yeah, I still have no idea what that word means, so I don’t know if you’re being mean to yourself right now,” Bobby said in frustration. “But I know that I don’t want you to feel like- like a slave or a toy or something.”

Daken sucked in his lip, looking down, his eyebrows frowning. After a minute he let his lip go and asked, “Why is it acceptable to want to belong to a community, or to a family, but it’s unacceptable to want to belong to a person?”

“Oh God, I--” Bobby rubbed his hands over his face, groaning in frustration. “You are so far over my head right now.”

“If you want simplicity, you should look elsewhere;” Daken said softly, taking a step backward.

“Because--” Bobby reached back quickly, putting his hands gently on Daken’s waist to keep him from retreating. “Because you should always feel like the reason you’re with somebody is because you love them, not because you have to be.”

“... ‘Love’ is a meaningless word. All meaning has been sapped from it by overuse and equivocal use,” Daken said softly. “In Japan, the word for ‘love’ is rarely, if ever, spoken. Some people never say it at all, through their lives, through their relationships... As if the word is a resource with a limited supply that requires careful rationing.”

“That’s… messed up,” Bobby said.

“That’s reverence,” Daken corrected. “The Abrahamic religions don’t take their god’s name in vain. The Japanese don’t take the word ‘love’ in vain.”

“Okay, yeah, maybe we use it too casually sometimes,” Bobby admitted, twisting with frustration inside. “But you have to say it sometimes. People need to know that they’re loved.”

“What does it mean?” Daken asked, looking up at him. “What does ‘love’ mean?”

Bobby stared at him, opening his mouth and closing it a few times.

“You don’t know, do you.”

“I- I know what love is.”

“But you can’t tell me?”

“I… That’s-- It’s just…” he faltered, feeling sick and anxious.

Daken looked away again. “If nobody can tell me, and I’m probably too damaged to feel any kind of ‘pure’ emotion... Then it’s fine, it’s logical, to forge a coupling based upon what makes good and advantageous sense.”

“That’s- That’s not how it works, Daken,” Bobby protested.

“That’s how it worked where I was born and spent my ‘formative’ years,” Daken retorted, a look somewhere between annoyed and pouty crossing his features. “Then the boomer generation tried love-based marriages, and all the frustration and pressure that went with having to choose for themselves upon such subjective, fanciful parameters... Now the millennials don’t want to get married at all, they’re dating pillows.”
“Oh so we’re hating on millennials with their avocado-toast and fetish pillowcases? Maybe you want to wave your cane and tell me to get off your lawn?” Bobby snorted.

“No. They’re not wrong,” Daken said softly, shaking his head. “For hundreds of years, Japanese society has placed practicality as one of the highest virtues… Defining a practical marriage, and what makes it such, is easy… ‘Love’ seems to defy definition. Trying to understand whom you’re supposed to love, trying to glean how you can possibly know when you do, it’s confounding.”

“I’m not going to say that practicality doesn’t matter, because it does to a degree,” Bobby said. “But love matters too.”

“You can’t even tell me what it is!” Daken protested, voice suddenly louder as his gaze snapped up to meet Bobby’s. There was desperation in his eyes.

Bobby stared at him for a minute, feeling helpless and incompetent. “What do you feel? About me?” he finally asked.

Daken bit his lip for a moment, and then suddenly hooked Bobby’s waist with one arm and reeled him in sharply, grabbing a fistful of his hair with the other hand and gripping it hard, pulling just enough pain from Bobby’s scalp to be titillating; combine that with suddenly finding himself pressed flush against Daken’s chest, and Bobby’s heart was in his throat as he tried not to get turned on in the middle of a very serious conversation. “Intense physical attraction,” Daken answered, whispering directly into Bobby’s ear and making him shiver. “Maybe stronger than I’ve ever felt before… Anger. When you get feisty with me over something important. Especially when I know that you’re in the right… Fear. When I’m sure that you’re in the wrong, but I know it doesn’t matter… Despair.”

“W-When is it despair?” Bobby asked breathilly, his heart pounding.

“All the time...” Daken’s voice cracked and his breath hitched.

Bobby hugged his arms tight around him again. “How can I help?” he whispered.

“... Tell me it’s okay,” Daken whined, breath hitching again. “Give me permission to feel like this.”

“You don’t need permission to--”

“Yes I do!”

Bobby faltered. His mind balked against the very idea of applying ‘permission’ to somebody’s emotions, but wasn’t telling somebody what they did or didn’t need exactly the same? Wasn’t contradicting what they felt they needed wrose? “… It’s okay to feel like that,” he whispered. “It’s okay and- and legitimate, and you don’t need to repress it or hide it.”

Daken was trembling. The hand in Bobby’s hair let go, dropping to his shoulder and clinging there as Daken dropped his head and shook. “Is- Is it love?” He whimpered softly. “Does love feel like shit?”

“Sometimes,” Bobby murmured. Was he just talking out of his ass? What the hell did he know about being in love? Had any of those relationships he’d chickened out of and backpedaled on, his subconscious knowing he couldn’t really make it work, been any valid kind of love?

“Do you want me to be in love with you?” Daken asked.

Bobby’s breath caught and he bit his lip, panic rising in him like he was facing down a firing
Daken swallowed so hard Bobby could feel it and then picked his head up off of Bobby’s shoulder and pulled back. Bobby reluctantly let him go, but instead of taking a step away, Daken tilted his head and pressed his lips against Bobby’s. His mind went largely blank, thought taking backseat to sensation. It didn’t seem to last long, definitely not long enough, and Daken’s tongue slid over his only briefly before withdrawing as he pulled away more fully, letting Bobby go. “Think about my question,” he said as he turned. Bobby struggled to remember the question as he watched Daken walk a few paces down the hall and then pause. “It… It would be okay. If you want me, partly, because of my powers… It would be practical, after all,” he said in a small, fragile voice. “I’d just… like to know.”

Queasiness and a feeling that was pity-adjacent settled in Bobby’s stomach along with a little spark of fear. Obviously self-examination was something he’d spent a large portion of his life trying to avoid for fear of the uncomfortable and frightening truths that could be hiding in the darkness. What if the answer turned out to be hurtful? But the absence of one would be worse, would be a pre-packaged neurosis. If there was even one percent of an affirmative to Daken’s query, he deserved to know about it.

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Daken had decided to cure his sanguine dyscrasia over the sink because, as Drake had pointed out, it was about dinner time; a decent bath would take too long. He stared down at the patterns created as blood hit damp porcelain. The lazy splatter, the viscous creep downward, the darting suffusion where it ran into a water droplet. After six slow cuts, he decided he couldn’t risk dawdling anymore. So he let his arm heal and wiped it off with a washcloth, then rinsed out the sink basin and dried his hands. He switched off the bathroom light and walked out into his front room, pulling the phone out of his pocket and picking a contact.

He held it to his ear and listened to the ring, staring blankly into space. “Hey,” came the minimalist answer.

“Do you want to get dinner?” Daken asked.

“Aw, are you asking me on a date?”

“Yes. Your wife never needs to know,” Daken replied.

“So you saying I should not put it on my Facebook?” Gambit asked. “It complicated wit’ Daken.”

“Obviously everything is complicated with me,” Daken sighed, running a hand over his hair. “So is that a ‘yes’?”

“Sure. What d’you feel like?”

“The Carlyle’s fine,” Daken decided.

“I barely have t’step outside my door den,” Gambit noted. “Suits me, if you buying.”

“Is the king of thieves strapped for cash?”

“De king of t’ieves ain’t getting conned like no yuppy,” Gambit retorted. “You want to pay hundred dollars for a plate wit’ one scallope and a twig of parsley on it? You do you.”
“Gambit, I would even buy you two scallopes,” Daken said, the corner of his mouth twiching upward.

“Well hot damn.”

“Meet you at the doors in fifteen minutes?”

“Sure.”

Daken made his way out of the school without getting pulled into any conversations and strode down the transverse, concentrating on the character of his sweat. As the evening heat made overall avoidance impossible, he focused on ensuring that he at least wouldn’t spend dinner wearing an aura that could predispose Gambit to giving unduly biased answers. As Daken neared the restaurant, he spotted his query standing near the awning, relaxedly watching his approach.

“You okay?” Gambit asked quietly when Daken reached him.

Daken glanced at him and shrugged, moving past and walking up to the door as the doorman opened it for them while side-eyeing Daken’s Tshirt. They took up residence at the end of the bar, and Daken thought about nothing but ordering drinks and appetizers until that task was complete.

“How do you know when you’re in love?” Daken asked, fidgeting with the garnish out of his sidecar.

Gambit clicked his tongue and looked thoughtful, tapping his fingernail against the counter for a minute. “... You t’ink about ‘em all de time. If you’re happy, if you’re sad, ain’t no pattern to it, dey just keep coming to your mind hundred times a day,” he said. “And sometimes it give you a flutter, sometimes it hurt. It hurt a lot, if you pining. Sometimes it hurt in a bad way, if you have an argument or somet’ing, sometimes it hurt in a way dat ain’t bad, but still hurt if dat make sense... Nah, it don’t make sense,” he amended himself, looking down at the counter. ‘Dere’s a lot dat don’t make sense. It’s a... It’s an intensity. Like you been hit by lightning. And you need somet’ing but damned if you know what it is, oder dan to be near ‘em, see ‘em smile and know it’s because of you.”

“... So you in love with Bobby?” Gambit asked softly.

“Zach’s afraid of him, and everything is just so god damned fucked up,” Daken whined.

“Okay, we take it one t’ing at a time den,” Gambit said, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I
guess Zach’s my godson now, so I gotta help you brainstorm way’v making him not afraid of Bobby to start.”

Daken swallowed, sucked in his lip, and nodded.

Chapter End Notes

Inugami: Ghost-dogs. These are a type of domestic-spirit from Japanese antiquity that have been super illegal for a thousand years, firstly because it's some major black-magic to create and own an inugami, and secondly because it's reprehensible animal cruelty. An inugami was created by ritualistically starving, torturing and beheading a dog, and then burying its head (location for where to bury the head could vary by regional telling). After the inugami is created, it becomes a fiercely loyal protector and slave.

Sanguine dyscrasia: from the 'four humors' of ye olde medicine. Dyscrasia is to have your humors out of balance, sanguine refers to the blood humor, as in having too much of it (thought to be a cause of fevers). This is the condition that was treated with leeching in the day. Daken doesn't actually believe in humorism in general, but he sometimes indulges various delusions of self-harming as curative.
Daken leaned against the wall in a first story hallway, staring into space and diligently holding his mind at a blank. The class-end bell rang, and he blinked a few times, clearing the fog as the door next to him opened and students started erupting from it. There weren’t many, upper-school classes were small, and his query was third out the door. “Genesis,” he called, and the young man turned a surprised, questioning look at him. “May I have a word?”

“Heh, okay,” Genesis agreed with a nod, and followed along as Daken turned and headed down the hall.

They walked to the nearest classroom that should be currently empty, and Daken opened the door to find it free of squatters, so made his way in before turning back to Genesis. “I have no right to ask you for favors, and you have no reason to grant any,” Daken said quietly. “And this really isn’t your problem.” He glanced away, feeling sick and second-guessing why he was even having this conversation.

“Hey, okay,” Genesis suggested.

“... Zach is afraid of Professor Drake,” Daken said, then bit his lip for a moment before continuing. “Gossip is probably circulating about Zach attacking a fellow student during the lockdown, but there was another, less public episode later, where he had a screaming fit at Professor Drake. It was... rather hysterical.”

“O...kay, that seems problematic, but I don’t understand what you think I can do about that?” Genesis asked.

“Zach’s fear is based in the fact that he doesn’t understand why Professor Drake would have had such an extreme reaction to the idea of me abducting a student,” Daken said, glancing back up at him.

“Oh.”

He looked away again. “... Professor Drake adopted a proactive, no-holds-barred strategy when he realized I was the one sponsoring Zach’s defection,” Daken explained. “To Zach’s perspective it looked like a brutal assault, because he lacked the context to understand that it wasn’t really so unprovoked.”

Genesis drew in an awkward breath through his teeth while biting his lip, and then was quiet for a
few seconds, before asking, “Can you please be more specific about what Professor Drake actually did? I don’t know exactly what went down there, and I need you to not send me into that conversation blind.”

“He went for an immediate and total incapacitation—”

“Detailed, physical description, please?”

Daken sucked in his lip and chewed on it for a moment, staring at nothing. “… He pinned me to a wall with a saw-blade made of ice. There was a lot of blood,” he said quietly.

Genesis made a sound somewhere between a groan and a wince. “Okay, wow, yeah,” he said, rubbing his hands over his face. “I know it can get pretty end-of-the-world scary when he stops pulling his punches—”

“That was still pulling his punches,” Daken murmured, shaking his head. “Just a little less-so than usual. He was thinking about compensating for my recovery-time, and not what the act looked like… Or felt like.”

“… Bobby’s a legitimately scary mutant,” Genesis said quietly, folding his arms. “If he weren’t such a compassionate person, shit, the world would probably look very different now.”

Daken sighed heavily, running his hands back through his hair and closing his eyes.

“This… Is this thing just about Zach’s ‘behavioral problems’, or are you really in a relationship now?” Genesis asked, and then gave an awkward, flustered look when Daken glanced back at him. “I mean, j-just-- That’s-- Th-There’s been a lot of grapevine-chatter the past week or so…” he stammered.

“I don’t know,” Daken said, his voice a little bit sharp and hasty. “There’s things I need to address before I… consider it… This among them.”

“Right. Yeah. And this is probably a thing that should be talked out either way, so, sure, I’ll talk to him,” Genesis said, nodding. “He has detention this week though, right?”

“I think being pulled out for an afternoon of peer-counselling would be fairly legitimate,” Daken replied with a sigh. “Where would you be comfortable? I’ll bring him to you.”

“I don’t know, where do you think he’d be comfortable?” Genesis asked. “This’ll probably be a stressful thing for him, right?”

Daken thought about it for a moment before deciding, “His dorm, most likely.”

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Zach had homework to do, but instead he was doodling in his drawing app when the door opened. He glanced up and bit his lip as he watched Daken come into the room, walk over to Professor Wagner and whisper something to him. Professor Wagner listened and nodded. “Of course,” he said.

Daken turned around, looking Zach in the eye, and gave a beckoning wave. Zach swallowed nervously, switching the screen of his tablet off and shoving it into his bag, then he slung it over a shoulder and followed Daken out of the classroom. He waited to get into the hallway before he started asking questions. “Why’d you pull me out? You’re the one who gave me detention. Was that just to make Deeds happy or something?”
“You’re not being excused from detention, Zach, I just arranged a peer-counselling engagement for you today,” Daken explained calmly.


“Don’t you think that what you’d rather do is fairly beside the point when talking about disciplinary measures?” Daken retorted, raising an eyebrow, and Zach’s face heated up as he fidgeted awkwardly with his bag strap. “Anyway, the purpose of discipline isn’t some sort of retribution, it’s to help you become well-adjusted or… whatever. Healthy. Mentally or emotionally or something.”

“You- You don’t know why I’m being punished?” Zach asked incredulously.

“I know that discipline is one of the factors in effectively teaching desired behavior,” Daken said, sounding frustrated and grimacing a little. “I also know that the behavior that I was conditioned for was toxic, and the extremes to which I was disciplined went well beyond ‘teaching’ and landed solidly in brain-washing territory. So I’m sorry, Zach, no, I don’t have all the answers for how to be a healthy person, because I am not a healthy person.”

“Sorry,” Zach mumbled, looking down.

Daken’s hand landed gently on his shoulder. “... The way Marcia raised you and the mixed messages I gave you when I was high on deathseed have taught you to relate to people in problematic ways, so now we’re just trying to correct for that,” he explained as they turned into the dormitory wing. “… And I need you to understand some of the other mistakes I’ve made and how they may have effected you.”

“Like what?”

“That’s what this, today, is about,” Daken said, voice getting a bit quieter.

“W-What do you mean? You said it was peer-counselling?” Zach asked anxiously and then glanced up the hall and noticed one of the college kids standing next to the door to his room.

“Yes,” Daken agreed, as they walked up to the older boy.

“Hi, Zach. I’ve seen you around but don’t think we’ve ever been properly introduced. I’m Evan,” he smiled.

“What…?” Zach demanded.

Evan looked down for a moment and he took a deep breath. “Daken asked me to talk to you about something that happened a few years ago,” he said softly. “You’re probably going to have questions for me later. If you want to have dinner together, text me.” Then he let Zach go and turned, walking away back down the hall.

Zach watched him for a few seconds and then turned on Evan. “What’s going on?”

“Daken asked me to talk to you about something that happened a few years ago,” Evan explained and nodded at Zach’s door. “It’s kind of intense, Daken thought you might be more comfortable in your dorm than a classroom or something.”

“Why?” Zach demanded.

Evan looked down for a moment and he took a deep breath. “Daken wants you to understand the way that people were treating him last year and when he first got here,” he said. “He asked me to
talk to you about it.”

“Why you?”

“... This is going to be the kind of thing that you don’t want to stand in the hall yelling about,” Evan said, looking back at him with a calm-serious face. “If you don’t want me in your room, we can go somewhere else to talk.”

Zach huffed in annoyance and touched the reader by his door. “Fine, whatever!” he snapped, pushing the door open and throwing his bookbag at the bed as he walked in. He turned around and crossed his arms, giving Evan a mild glare. “So? What?”

Evan glanced around and grabbed Zach’s desk chair, turning it around and sitting down. He took a deep breath, looking away, and then started. “A few years ago, there was this… thing, where I got kidnapped… I was just grabbed out of a field trip, and then for a while I was held inside a psychic illusion so it was hard to tell how much time passed or anything.”

“And so, what, Daken was the badguy there?” Zach snapped, glaring at the window and prickling with discomfort. “He can’t do psychic bullshit.”

“It was honestly really hard to tell who the badguy was. The story kept changing,” Evan said. “At the beginning, Daken took full credit for starting up a badguy squad and coming up with a flamboyant supervillain scheme to destroy the world and stuff that, in retrospect, was so over-the-top somebody probably should have stopped and said ‘now wait a minute’. He shook his head and leaned an elbow against Zach’s desk. “After… a lot of pretty bad stuff happened, and Daken was… down… Sabertooth said that he’d set the whole thing up and had kind of dared Daken into being the frontman for it.”

“So Sabertooth’s the badguy then! What’s the big deal?” Zach exclaimed.

“... Zach, would you sit down, please?” Evan asked, staying mellow. “I want to talk about this in-depth with you, because I think it’s going to help you understand why everybody freaked the hell out when you ran away with Daken last year. They got seriously scared, and I’m trying to explain to you why.”

Zach huffed and whined, and finally sat down on the foot of his bed and glowered sulkily back at Evan.

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Bobby’s steps faltered, on his way to change out of teacher-clothes into play-clothes, when he looked up and noticed Daken standing right next to his door, eyes locked on him. “H-Hi,” Bobby stammered, telling himself to be cool.

“You’re finished with classes,” Daken said; it wasn’t a question because he had access to class schedules like any teacher. “Did you have any other obligations this afternoon?”

“No. Did you want to… do something?”

Daken shook his head, there was a worried look in his eyes. “I need to tell you something,” he said quietly.

“... Okay.” Bobby nodded and opened his door, stepping through and holding it for Daken as he came in.
Daken drifted into the middle of the living room like a ghost ship and then stopped, biting his lip for a minute and not looking at Bobby. Finally, he took an audible breath and started. “After he took me out of my mother, Romulus didn’t want to be burdened with taking care of a larve, so he left me on a doorstep… I don’t think it was picked at random, the situation was too convenient, so he must have chosen it ahead of time,” he explained. “It was a… rural, superstitious community, with a lot of folk traditions and beliefs in the supernatural that probably sound silly now… I was initially welcomed into the home quite warmly because of those old superstitions, because the folk tales about Momotaro and the like were very popular in that time.”

“Sure,” Bobby said, nodding. He knew he’d heard the name ‘Momotaro’ before, but couldn’t remember what the story was off the top of his head.

“Probably somewhere around sixteen to twenty weeks, my foster-mother’s feelings on it would have started to change… when she realized that my eyes weren’t going to,” Daken said, voice getting a little quieter. He bit his lip for a moment before continuing. “Since my epicanthic folds and facial structure have always favored my mother’s side, my mixed heritage could have been camouflaged by my newness. ‘Baby blues’ aren’t the norm in Japan, but they wouldn’t be a suspicious aberration on their own either.” His head dipped a little, staring at the carpet. “I think she reconsidered the assumption of mixed heritage later… In the end, I’m pretty sure she’d decided I was youkai.”

“That’s… Japanese demons?” Bobby asked.

“No, not ‘demons’.” Daken shook his head. “More like the tricksters, monsters and talking animals in old fairy tales. Youkai are things that are wild, spooky and potentially deadly, but they’re not ‘demonic’ in a religious way,” he explained, looking back at Bobby. “Some of the ‘popular’ trickster types are known for taking human form and either causing ‘hijinks ensue’ situations or outright ruining people’s lives…” He gestured vaguely at his face. “Apart from my eyes and mysterious arrival, she also… she noticed when my powers started to manifest. I hadn’t noticed yet, but she did, and it scared her, that she could see and feel me affecting the moods of people near me.”

“Okay, yeah, that would probably be pretty freaky without any context,” Bobby said cringingly. “Especially if she spent a lot of time worrying about spirit-critters or whatever.”

“That community was more superstitious and… hickish than was typical of the majority of Japan in that era. It was a backwater,” Daken said quietly, looking away again. “Which is one of the reasons I assume Romulus chose that house specially. Higher potential for racists.”

“Got it.”

“There was… another folk belief. It’s not official doctrine, it actually runs counter to official doctrine, but it’s been a fairly popular tradition in many eras, even now… These days it’s become associated primarily with terminated pregnancies,” Daken said, and Bobby felt himself flinch, discomfited by the topic in general, but also feeling a sinking dread at what it could be leading to. “… When I was seven, one of the neighbors had a late-term miscarriage, some particularly nasty complication where they weren’t sure if she was going to survive it herself for a while. She did pull through, but she lost the baby… And my foster-father talked to me about it, as, I suppose, one does when some form of death happens near a child young enough that they need to have it explained,” he paused, swallowing and taking a deep breath. “… He told me that if a baby dies before it’s born, or when it’s a newborn, then it gets a mulligan, and its soul is born into the next available vacancy… And that it’s a somber event because the expectant couple misses the chance to be parents for the time being, but that I didn’t need to worry about what would become of the baby...
it would be fine.”

“That- That’s nice. That seems like a really comforting kind of belief,” Bobby said, shifting awkwardly on his feet.

“Yes… I suppose so,” Daken agreed very softly, nodding the tiniest bit.

More than a minute of silence fell. “... Daken?” Bobby finally called, watching him with a sense of impending dread.

“... When I was nine, my foster-mother got pregnant,” Daken said quietly. “It was calculated. She wanted badly to get rid of me, because that’s when she started noticing my powers…” He closed his eyes and bit his lip for a moment. “... And then she started working on her husband every day, trying to convince him that I needed to go before the baby arrived… But he saw through her. I think he knew that she must have gone behind his back and found somebody who could knock her up, since he hadn’t been able to in fifteen years of marriage… He probably never called her out on it, but he didn’t ship me off anywhere either… He knew.”

“... What happened?”

“The baby came. A boy... I wanted to take away her prize and send the his soul to find a better mother,” Daken whispered hoarsely. “... So I did.”

Bobby put his hand over his mouth; he wasn’t sure if it was because he thought he was going to vomit or scream. He stared at nothing. His breaths came faster and faster, turning into wheezes. Part of him had known that was coming and tried to pretend it wasn’t. His knees buckled and hit the floor. He pressed his palms against the carpet to keep from collapsing any further. His breath was coming in gasps now, and he could feel tears starting to creep down his cheeks. “... God…” he whimpered.

“You have a right to know what kind of creature you’d be inviting into your bed,” Daken said.

“Y-Y-You were n-nine?” Bobby stammered, not looking up.

“Almost ten,” Daken answered quietly.

That was so young. Too young. But ‘Reason’ came at seven, didn’t it? The reincarnation thing though, Bobby didn’t even know where that landed this. “Y-You bel-lieved w-what he s-said about th-the baby j-just… going s-somewhere else…?” Bobby whispered.

“I hadn’t learned the difference between faith and fact yet,” Daken whispered.

Suddenly Bobby was sobbing. He picked one hand up off the floor, covering his mouth again, trying to reign in hysteria. For a second he considered freezing up, but it seemed wrong to tune this out, to turn his back. Because he was a fucking adult. Daken hadn’t been. He’d been too young to understand. Bobby managed to pull back from sobs into ragged gasps again, and tried to articulate something, anything. “H-H-How?” That hadn’t been anything he wanted to say; that wasn’t anything he wanted to know.

“I put a pillow on top of him while he was napping,” Daken said. “I didn’t push down on it. I didn’t have to. Infants’ lungs aren’t as strong as adults’. I just stepped back, and… waited… He never woke up.”

Three more sobs got past Bobby’s lips, then he panted a couple times and swallowed. “... Y-You regret-t it?” Bobby whispered, hesitantly looking up.
Daken was looking away, his arms were crossed and his brow was pinched. “... I’ve asked myself that many, many times,” he said quietly. “And every time I think about it, eventually, when I’ve fretted myself to exhaustion, I always have to come back to the same reality… Romulus would have come back for me sooner or later, probably sooner, and then he would have killed them all himself… And if he’d done it, it wouldn’t have been quick.” He closed his eyes and bit his lip for a few seconds. “... I was a slow-acting poison. They were dead the moment I was dropped on their stoop.”

Bobby drew a shuddering breath. “... Your foster-parents?”

Daken pursed his lips for a minute before saying quietly, “The woman was an accident. I resented her, I was angry at her, I wanted to hurt her, but- but not physically. I wanted to hurt her like she’d hurt me… I told her Jun was dead, and I taunted her, rubbed it in.” He closed his eyes and bit his lip for a moment, then unfolded his arms, holding his hands out in front of him, palms up, fingers flaccidly curled, and his claws extended slowly. “I wasn’t trying to kill her though. I didn’t know. It was the first time,” he whispered. “When she came after me, to kill me... I was just trying to push her away.”

Bobby put a knuckle in his mouth and bit down hard on it.

“Her husband killed himself… Redemption for bringing a wild animal into the house and turning a blind eye to the signs. For ignoring his wife’s warnings. Pretending he couldn’t see what I was,” Daken said hollowly; his claws retracted, and he wrapped his arms around himself again.

Bobby sniffled and swallowed, wiping his hands over his cheeks, smearing at the tears without much hope of banishing them.

“... For a long time, when I dreamed of ‘home’, it wasn’t about them… I had an aversion to ‘adults’ for a few years,” Daken whispered, head lowering a little. “I’d imagine Jun... I had this elaborate, secret fantasy world... that was just him and me.” Daken’s voice shifted, taking on a note of congestion. “I’d imagine that instead of smothering him that day, I’d picked him up and run. Run so fast and so far, nobody caught us. No village children, no disappointed and disappointing ‘mother’, no willfully oblivious ‘father’, no Romulus… That was the daydream I’d indulge while my bones were knitting back together after a ‘lesson’.”

Bobby’s eyes tracked a tear rolling slowly over Daken’s cheekbone and down to his jaw. “... Daken--”

“I’m going to go now,” Daken announced suddenly, his voice coming back up to a conversational volume, but pinched with congestion. “I’m not trying to burden you with some imperative to make conversation about it. I just… I just needed to tell you, so that you’d know. It wouldn’t be fair to hide this from you if…” He shook his head and turned, not looking at Bobby. Daken strode past him without making eye contact, and then paused, hesitating, with his hand on the doorknob. “... Please don’t tell Laura,” he whined softly. Then, without waiting for a response, he pulled the door open and disappeared through it.

Bobby looked back down at the floor. He took a shaky breath through his mouth and then clenched his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut. After a minute, he tipped himself to the side and flopped down on the carpet. He lay there and shivered for a few more minutes, then iced up.

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“I got you sweet and sour pork,” Daken said as he opened his door to Zach.
He smelled anxious but affected nonchalance. “And spring rolls?” he asked.

“Of course,” Daken agreed, waiting at the side as Zach walked into his sitting room. He pushed the door shut, and then gave a slightly startled flinch as Zach lunged and latched onto him in a sudden, fierce hug. Settling, Daken wrapped one arm around Zach’s shoulders and cossetted his hair. “... So you’re upset, but you don’t seem mad at me.”

“... He said you punched him,” Zach said quietly.

“Yes,” Daken confirmed. “The goal where Genesis was concerned was to make him scared and angry, but even the telepath had failed at it. Instead he’d been given an existential crisis and put in an almost catatonic depression.” He gave a heavy sigh. “So I bombarded him with pheromones, screamed in his face and punched him... He is remarkably difficult to get a rise out of though, even I didn’t make any real headway. But when we gave him somebody to protect, boom.”

“Why’d you get into that though?” Zach asked, pulling away to look up at him. “All of that stuff sounds dumb, and you don’t even like Sabertooth, right?”

“I don’t,” Daken agreed, grimacing and shaking his head. “... Part of it is that Sabertooth knows my triggers. Not many people can play me, and Sabertooth can only really manage when it’s really me playing myself... I needed to prove he was wrong... And he knew that.”

“What was he wrong about?” Zach asked.

“He wasn’t,” Daken said, walking over to the couch and dropping tiredly into it. “He knew Logan better than me. He knew how to push him. And knew what he’s capable of when pushed just right.”

“... He killed you,” Zach whispered.

Daken let his head drop back and stared up at the ceiling. “... Things between us went from one trainwreck to another. His fault, my fault, his fault, my fault,” he sighed, closing his eyes. “He did things to me... I don’t think he understands even now how bad they hurt. And I did things because I wanted to hurt him... And sometimes I did things to hurt us both, because that seemed worth it.”

Zach sniffled, and Daken lifted his head to watch him wiping an arm across his face. “H-He’s bad at being a dad,” he muttered.

“... And I’m pretty bad at being a son,” Daken said softly. “He’s trying to do better now, and so am I.”

Zach shuffled over to the couch and sat down, scooting up against Daken’s side, so Daken draped an arm around his shoulders.

“Do you understand now, why Professor Drake went medieval on me that first time?” Dake asked.

Zach tensed up. “He was still wrong. And he hits kids too. He’s a hypocrite.”

“He got chewed out by his boss, for both things, and I think he realized he’d screwed up even before that,” Daken said. “And... he seems to be pretty good about not repeating the same mistake, once it’s pointed out to him.”

“You don’t really like him, do you?” Zach whined, twisting to look up at him.

“I’m trying to figure things out,” Daken said, not quite able to look back at him. “... Are you going
to be mad at me if I do?”

Zach buried his face against Daken’s collarbone. “I don’t want him to hurt you again.”

Daken wrapped both arms around him and murmured against his hairline, “It’s not going to be like that again, Zach… Maybe it’s not going to be like anything, I don’t know. But I promise, I’ll keep you and me safe.”

“It won’t happen again’ is what people always say,” Zach muttered darkly.

Daken was silent for a moment, trying to piece together a response. “That’s accurate, yes, but doing something once doesn’t equal a behavior pattern,” he said softly. “I’ve committed my share of misbehavior, and I don’t think I want to be defined by it forever now… It’s difficult to change your context, context lingers a long time, but once a person has made the shift, everything around them starts getting recontextualized piece by piece.”

“I don’t know what you just said,” Zach complained. “I think maybe you didn’t say anything.”

“Mm, not my most articulate,” Daken sighed, shaking his head. “... Are you going to forbid me to consider it?”

“I’m a kid. I’m not allowed to ‘forbid’ stuff.”

“You deserve a say if you don’t feel safe,” Daken replied.

Zach was quiet for a couple minutes, then shook his head. “I don’t want to gotta ‘forbid’. That’s not my job,” he said.

Daken looked down, chewing on his lip for a moment. “It probably isn’t even be relevant, you know. I don’t think it’s going to come to anything,” he said with a dispassionate shrug.

Chapter End Notes

The timeline presented in Daken's backstory is odd in a lot of ways. First, it contradicts the previously-established canon for Logan's backstory, specifically where he was in 1946, but the probable reason for why Way picked that year for Daken's birth relates to the Chinese Zodiac: it was the year of the dog. So symbolism trumps old-canon and retcons happen all the time, no reason to get ruffled about that. It's the math getting a little weird from there out. The first time-jump in the backstory is labelled "Nine Years Later", in which we are told by Natsumi that Daken's pheromone powers have started to manifest and see Daken starting to become aggressive (a very noticeable trait in all other 'feral' type mutants, although whether it manifests as 'mean' like Sabertooth or 'boisterous' like Catseye seems pretty environmental). Next we have a smaller time-jump, probably about 8 months, but the captions inform us it's 1955, so, still inside the same year as the previous scene? Either the initial "Nine Years Later" took place very early in the year and the next scene took place late in the year, or the "Nine Years" was an "ish", but if it was 1955, then Daken still would have been nine either way. (The next jump to 1959 is weirder to me, because Daken is drawn looking full-adult. But maybe Segovia just doesn't know how to draw scrawny teenagers; children and teen drawing is a very inconsistent skill in Marvel's artist pool.)
The scab's been picked off of an old crisis.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings:
- References to infanticide
- Suicidal thoughts

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three-plus hours of freaking out alone in his room had yielded no insights, epiphanies or solace, and it only had Bobby running the same circles over and over, mentally pacing, and sometimes physically. But what else could he do? He couldn’t talk to anybody about this, right? ‘Please don’t tell Laura.’ If Laura didn’t know then there were good odds nobody knew. Unless Johnny knew. But how could Bobby even find out if Johnny knew without betraying confidence if it turned out he didn’t?

Nine was so young.

Gambit had said that Daken popped young, but nine? Even in second-generation mutants, having an active-power pop younger ten was really rare. And mostly only when the kid had suffered intense stress. Would nine years with a mother-figure who didn’t want him and in a racist neighborhood that constantly side-eyed him be the kind of stress that could trigger an early manifestation, or had he been hardwired to be an early-bloomer from the start? Even though he only knew specifics about the tiniest percentage of Daken’s life, Bobby had a pretty good general sense that trauma was one of its most consistent defining factors. And he’d been so young.

But nine was older than seven.

And after a tiny, sickening comparison had wriggled its way into Bobby’s head near the end of the first hour, he couldn’t unsee it. Daken had killed the baby to take something away from his foster-mother, because he didn’t think he could hurt her directly. It was the exact same logic behind his attack on Judah. Both attacks were calculated, not a reflexive, unthinking snap. But both were a reaction to being hurt and maybe scared. An underhanded retaliation strike was his ‘wounded’ response. There was that ‘wounded animal’ viciousness in the act, but a fastidious strategist’s deliberation in the how.

Maybe nine had been too young to understand murder, but seventy-whatever wasn’t.

But he hadn’t killed Judah. He’d struck with a surgeon’s precision to alienate him, brutally but non-lethally. He’d aimed for the specific goal to ‘take him away’ from Bobby, exactly like he’d thought he was taking the baby away from his foster-mother. Attempting to separate, rather than to end. To punish the focus of his hurt and outrage while putting a MacGuffin out of reach with maximum efficiency. Because Daken was cold but not cold-blooded, unsympathetic but not unfeeling, mean but not blood-thirsty.

And he was remorseful.

When Daken had said he wasn’t sure if he regretted it, that had plainly been his analytical, pragmatic bias answering. What he’d said about the ghost turned imaginary friend, imaginary
world, and that tear Bobby had seen on his cheek, it all definitely spoke to emotional-regret, even if it was out of line with practical-regret. And the fact he’d decided that this one moment of his history was so important that Bobby needed to know it more than anything else that had happened in all the rest of Daken’s seven decades showed he didn’t take it lightly in any way. The memory weighed on him. Hurt him.

And nine was so young.

But it was older than seven.

An unwelcome, uncomfortable thought kept trying to surface and Bobby kept trying to shove it down, but it kept coming back again and again. He needed to talk to a priest. No, he didn’t. Bobby hadn’t spoken to a priest, he hadn’t set foot inside a church, he hadn’t prayed, he’d been giving God the silent treatment, ever since a reverend had murdered forty-five children faster than the X-Men could so much as blink. God had a lot to answer for. Bobby didn’t want to hear what He’d have to say, but part of him was angry that God couldn’t be bothered to say anything.

Bobby didn’t want to talk to God. He didn’t want to talk to a priest. But he wanted to talk to somebody. Somebody who could understand how much part of him wanted to talk to God and how much the rest of him didn’t. Somebody who could understand all the rest. And Bobby knew there was maybe exactly one person in the world who was in maybe exactly the right place to maybe exactly understand. And he’d fucked it up and made it weird.

But three-plus hours of nauseating himself had weakened Bobby’s resolution to leave it alone, and he found himself staring at his contact list, watching his phone’s screen display time out a few times, and then finally hitting ‘call’. He stared at nothing as he listened to the rings and the sound of a pick-up.

“Well now here’s a blast from the ancient past. Has the ice-age ended, or are you just having another crisis?” Rictor’s voice asked.

“... Shit. Now I feel like even more of a dickhead,” Bobby winced, thinking he really might puke.

“Whoa, okay, sorry, I wasn’t trying to make you feel like a dickhead,” Rictor said quickly. “So is that a ‘yes’ to the crisis thing then? You sound not-okay.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have-- It’s still too weird to talk like people, isn’t it,” Bobby said, almost whining in tired frustration. “I know it’s my fault, I made it weird, and I shouldn’t--”

“Bobby, shut up,” Rictor cut him off in sharp exasperation and then half-sighed, half-groaned. “I don’t want to ‘talk like people’, Bobby, but if you stop freaking out and guilting yourself for two seconds, we could talk like friends, okay?”

Bobby bit his lip and inhaled around his teeth. “... I’m honestly having a ‘freaking out’ kind of night.”

Rictor was quiet for a few seconds before taking an audible breath and saying, “I can bluetooth this freakout, or if you want to face-to-face it, while I can’t really take off and leave the bar short-handed, Wednesday is pretty much the slowest night, so get yourself down here and I’ll stash you in the back room. We can talk as long as and whenever there’s not a rush on.”

Bobby sighed, some little sliver of relief creeping into him. “... That would be fantastic. Thank you,” he said.

“Sure sure,” Rictor replied dismissively. “Now hurry it up, I’ve only got all night.”
“Okay. Be there soon,” Bobby agreed before the call ended.

He walked into his bathroom to wash his face and frown at himself in the mirror. He didn’t look anymore okay than he sounded. But a few minutes in ice-form would be more than enough to erase the pinkness around Bobby’s eyes, even if not quite enough to push all the unease from inside of him. So he switched off the light and walked back to the bedroom, changing into his uniform and grabbing a light jacket that, while not in any way enough to disguise his definitely-a-superhero wardrobe choice, could offset it into a more casual I’m-not-working look.

Unlike his last trip across the river, Bobby forewent the pains of inconspicuous public transit and skated the whole way, making much better time and not having to interact with anybody along the way. He skidded to a stop in front of the Shakedown and deiced before walking inside, where he was assaulted by an over-dramatic sound of indignant disgust. “Really, Bobby? Bringing your barefoot self in here like health code violations aren’t even a thing?” Rictor demanded from behind the bar. “You are an adult. Put some damn shoes on like the rest of us.”

Bobby iced up again and tilted his head to the side, shooting back, “Is it still a health code violation if my feet are crystal clear and pristine as a mountain spring?” he asked.

Rictor rolled his eyes as the other guy behind the bar chuckled. “If my health safety rating goes down, I am going to hold you personally accountable,” he said, and then waved for Bobby to follow as he walked toward a door in the corner.

“That seems fair,” Bobby agreed, following.

The back room was populated by a few rows of storage shelves on one side and a small break area with a loveseat and a cardtable on the other. Bobby deiced again and flopped onto one side of the sofa with a sigh. Rictor sat down on the other end, looking him over scrutinizingly. “You sounded pretty upset on the phone, and I’ve got to admit I’m curious why you would have called me and not Hank or someone,” he said.

“Well you’re great, so don’t short-change yourself, but also there’s a convergence of a lot of reasons to make you the person I thought I should talk to,” Bobby said, feeling the weight and pressure starting to crumple in on him again now that he was flesh. “I was super hesitant because of how I made everything weird, but maybe that’s just another reason I needed to call you.”

“Okay, real quick, I want to point out that I made it weird first,” Rictor said, shaking his head and leaning back into the cushions, gazing up at the ceiling. “And... even if I got kind of bitchy about it and all, I did it because I was in the middle of my own crisis and just feeling shitty enough that I ignored the little voice in the back of my head saying ‘is this weird?’”

Bobby studied him for a minute, digesting that. “Have you been okay?” he asked.

Rictor rolled his head toward him and flashed a quick grin. “Yeah. Yeah, much better,” he said. “I moved out of the month-to-month roach trap I was renting and went home,” he said. “I mean, it’s not, like, smooth sailing all the time, but we’re working on it. Shatterstar’s talking to me about his existential stuff now, and Layla’s started inviting herself and the baby over randomly. Just showing up at the house unannounced and expecting free snacks. I gripe about it, but feeding her is cheaper than a therapist and Shatterstar won’t go to one anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Paranoia.”
“... How much does he need a therapist?” Bobby asked.

“I’m in no position to judge that one,” Rictor replied with a shrug. “I feel like half the people I know have told me I should be medicated at some point.”

“Right, but… I don’t actually know his deal beyond extremely vague outline,” Bobby said awkwardly. “How bad was what he came from? I mean, Mojoworld is a bad trip, but, like, for him.”

“... It was bad,” Rictor said quietly, then paused a few seconds before continuing. “He started opening up in very general terms with me when we were still kids, but specifics… those come out in little tiny bits and pieces here and there… I think I get most pissed off when I find out there’s something Cable knew and I didn’t.” He grimaced.

“So, despite how he hypes it when he gets into trash-talk mode, he wasn’t just born a killing machine,” Bobby extrapolated.

Rictor visibly bit his lip for a moment, going very still, before responding in a low, toneless voice. “Thank you for giving me the opportunity to correct you and make sure that you never call him a ‘machine’ to his face.”

“I- I’m sorry! I didn’t-- I wasn’t trying to--” Bobby flustered.

“Machine, toy, doll, any variant or synonym, just don’t. Ever,” Rictor said, and then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “It doesn’t register as a thing for you, but it will burn the bridge with him.”

Bobby groaned in self-frustration and rubbed his hands over his face. “Am I really really insensitive?”

“No, that’s not a thing people normally think of unless they’ve got a reason to,” Rictor replied. “He’s mellowed out a lot from when he was younger, and part of it is he’s had time to unpack some baggage, and part of it is just he’s got a better handle on the culture so he understands the things people are saying to him now… He’s still got a few specific triggers, he’s not going to fly into a rage about them, but he’ll decide he doesn’t like somebody over it.” He sighed and looked at Bobby. “You had a thing though. What’s your crisis?”

“Related,” Bobby said, running his hands back through his hair before dropping them limply to his sides. “I’ve kind of fallen for another beautiful, traumatized, killing not-machine… And I feel like I’m making a mess of things in general, but today… I’m… I’m having trouble reconciling the killer part.”

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“How many beautiful, traumatized, killing not-machines do we have around?” Rictor wondered, tilting his head and frowning for a moment before his eyebrows went up in a look of realization. "Oh." He glanced at Bobby again and grinned. “Are we talking about the new teacher?”

“Yes.” Bobby glanced away, self-consciousness momentarily crowding out despondency.

“He is pretty,” Rictor noted with a soft chuckle before sobering. “... I’m not sure how much help I can be with the reconciling thing. Shatterstar was raised to be a gladiator, not an assassin. He doesn’t go after somebody who’s not trying to fight him. I mean, okay, sometimes he used to get a little confused about who was or wasn’t picking a fight... And I’ve been told a few times there’s maybe some issues when he’s upset about something… me... and he’ll go around trying to get skinhead-types to start something with him so he can beat them up...” He twisted his mouth to the
side and wrinkled his nose a little for a moment and then glanced at Bobby again. “I’m not going to say there’s no aggression problems, but even when he gets into it with jerks he knows are way under his weight-class just because he’s in a bad mood and wants to curb-stomp somebody, he still always makes sure they are jerks first. He likes to bully bullies sometimes. I can’t feel too bad for them, because Star’s gotten pretty good at picking out the ones who deserve a broken nose.”

Bobby’s hopes for some kind of insight or advice sank. He hadn’t really considered that there could be a huge variation of type when it came to ‘bred and raised to kill indiscriminately’ and that they could have completely different underlying codes of conduct. “So you’ve never felt any, like, vicarious ethical crisis-thing there,” he murmured.

“Ethical? Not really that. But, not to say there’s never been a crisis-thing…” Rictor said quietly, crossing his arms and frowning, brow drawing in. “… Tab and Theresa have both said he gets mean in little or big ways when I leave him, or when he’s worried I might… Tab says he’s got a whole different personality, before he met me and after we broke up the first time… And that’s scary, right? I mean, I don’t feel like he’s lying about who he is or deliberately being on best-behavior for me, he’s too earnest for that shit. It’s like… Did I make him totally codependent?” He closed his eyes and bit his lip for a moment. “… I get a lot of paranoia about why we’re together. Sometimes I’m paranoid that he can’t be a whole, functioning person on his own because I somehow fucked up his recovery. Am I holding him back? Is he holding me back?” Rictor’s voice dropped to a whisper. “… I’ve dumped him four times since we were kids. That’s really bad, right? Like, it’s really unhealthy, isn’t it?”

Bobby scooted and put an arm around Rictor’s shoulders. He was really the first student Bobby had ever had, and to date, probably still the most anxious one. “Alternately, what if you just lucked into the one-true-love thing really early, and both of you just can’t even picture happiness without each other,” he suggested, really hoping he wasn’t dead wrong or making a complicated, neurotic situation worse. “… Ric, instead of worrying about getting over codependence or trauma or any of that, maybe you guys should focus on getting over the paranoia of therapists thing… It does help.”

Rictor shifted and leaned into him. “I’m not helping you much,” he noted quietly. “What can I do here?”

“… Do you still pray?” Bobby asked.

Rictor took a deep breath and then blew it out slowly through his teeth. “Not… regularly… Mostly when I’m stressed. And mostly… it’s not a ‘please protect Mama and the niños’ anymore, it’s more like… ‘dude what the hell is your problem?’”

“I hear that,” Bobby sighed, grimacing slightly. “… You still think of yourself as Catholic?”

Rictor was quiet for a minute. “… I’ve heard people say you never stop being Catholic, you just become a bad Catholic,” he said. “I’m a bad Catholic. I haven’t been to church in a long time. But it’s not like I’m deciding not to go because I believe in some other thing, I just don’t feel like going. But… you can’t tear up the foundation and still have a building. So yeah, I think I’m still Catholic.”

“I don’t know if I’m a bad Catholic or just a lapsed Catholic,” Bobby said quietly. “Or are those the same thing?”

“Maybe depends on why you’re lapsed,” Rictor said.

“… Just- Just even thinking about trying to listen to a sermon, I still get a nauseous… since the massacre,” Bobby said, voice fading to a pinched whisper.
“... I think… I think that doesn’t qualify as ‘bad Catholic’ then,” Rictor murmured. “Feeling like you got betrayed doesn’t make you bad… But, maybe it’s not a great idea either. I mean, being afraid to think about it. Doesn’t it seem like not thinking about something, because asking yourself the questions is uncomfortable, has maybe been kind of a problem that’s usually made things worse for you?”

“... I’ve been fighting terrorists and monsters and aliens since I was a kid. The only thing I’m afraid of is me... And how mad and disappointed people, and God, are going to be with me,” Bobby whined softly.

“None of your real-family is disappointed in you. We’re proud of you,” Rictor said. “And unless God’s a complete dickhead, I don’t think He can be disappointed either. You try as hard as anybody I know. And you’re on the money with the commandments stuff… Except maybe the graven images. You make a lot of stupid statues.”

“Yeah, but I am confident I never made a golden calf,” Bobby pointed out, a tired smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “I don’t do gold.”

“Thou shalt not make ice-swans and crap in vain,” Rictor chuckled, and then sighed softly and was quiet for a minute or two before venturing, “So you’re crushing on an ex-assassin, and you’re having an ‘ethical crisis-thing’ about the killing, and you’ve got religion on the brain… Are you scared that ‘sin’ is going to rub off on you or something? Doesn’t the Bible say to hate the sin but love the sinner?”

“I don’t think the Bible actually says that. I think that’s just something people say… And don’t they usually say it when they’re talking about gayness?” Bobby said, wrinkling his nose.

“Yeeeah,” Rictor agreed, grimacing. “But, I mean, forget that part for a second. The guy’s not still killing people, right? Isn’t that a thing he got forced into and he’s stopped now? Or am I misunderstanding the story? Because, I mean, the whole theology is built around repentance. Even if he’s not gonna go confess to a priest, the fact that he’s stopped killing people and is trying to get better and do better kinda sounds like he’s repentant.”

“Yeah, that follows, it’s…” Bobby bit his lip for a few seconds, staring blankly across the room. It was the specifics of what Daken had told him that were the secret, right? Specifically the baby part. How much rules-lawyering could Bobby get away with before he’d be betraying the confidence placed in him? “... The narrative as I understood it was that Romulus was the one who turned him into an assassin and made him start killing people and all... But today he told me that he killed someone before that.”

“... Shit,” Rictor said softly. He sat up straighter again and turned a little to look at Bobby, a bit of uncertain worry on his brow.

“I mean, he was only nine, I don’t think he really understood what he was doing,” Bobby explained, feeling frustrated and guilty for toeing this line. “But the ‘age of reason’ is seven--”

“I don’t think that’s right,” Rictor said, frowning.

“You weren’t confirmed at seven?” Bobby asked. “I was.”

“No, I was. But I don’t think they’re saying that means a seven year old is just responsible for themselves. That’d be tiny-anarchy,” Rictor said, shaking his head. “It means seven’s a good time for a kid to start participating in mass and trying to understand what the Padre’s saying, and to start doing confession so Padre can, ideally, help them understand what is and isn’t malicious sin,
because they don’t get that yet.” He rolled his eyes and shrugged slightly. “Y’know, forget the ‘sins’ those angry assholes on street corners get hung up about, I mean the ‘don’t hurt people’ stuff.”

“... So a nine year old is still an innocent?” Bobby asked.

“Yeah, man, nine year olds are stupid,” Rictor replied. “Take it from me, I’ve got seven little brothers and sisters, and that’s not even starting in on the cousins. Kids are dumb.”

Bobby laughed despite himself, and then settled into a tentatively hopeful anxiety. “You think he really just didn’t understand what he was doing?” he asked, glancing back at Rictor.

Rictor was quiet for a minute, his mouth a neutral line, his brow slightly pinched. “... If it was deliberate, not an accident, then... I think he knew he was ‘breaking the rules’, that kind of thing. A three year old knows when they’re breaking the rules, but even if they know they’re not behaving, they don’t really understand why what they’re doing is wrong. They’ve just been told that it is,” he said slowly, eyes shifting down, looking at his knees. “I think a nine year old can understand why stealing or punching someone is wrong, because those are pretty easy to get... but I don’t know about killing, that’s a much bigger thing to get your head around.” He looked up at Bobby again. “The courts here say it’s fourteen for that. Nine’s definitely not fourteen.”

Bobby sighed, leaning his head back and feeling much lighter. Nine was a long way from fourteen.

“Bobby, I’m giving you an opinion as somebody who’s been around a lot of little kids and went to Sunday school, but I didn’t do seminary, I probably haven’t even read the whole Book,” Rictor said quietly. “If you need the views of the Gay-Mutant-and-Catholic Club, then there you go. But if having an official doctrine kind of answer would help you bury this, then I think you should talk to Kurt.”

Bobby bit his lip, staring at the ceiling, for a minute. “... What if the official doctrine says something I don’t like?”

“I’m not saying you’ve definitely got to ask. I’m saying if you need a legitimately churchy answer, then instead of some rando with a funny collar and no clue about our world, Kurt would be a better choice,” Rictor said.

“Yeah. That’s true,” Bobby whispered, nodding slightly. “I’ll think about it.”

“Well, if it ends up that it’s all cool and everything works out, maybe you can bring your incredibly deadly and extremely bladey sweetheart, and I’ll bring my incredibly deadly and extremely bladey sweetheart, and we can all get dinner together sometime,” Rictor said in a lighter voice.

“Incredibly Deadly Double-Date. I’d watch that movie.” Bobby grinned.

“Summer action blockbuster and romcom.”

“Yeah.”

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Daken lay on the floor of his sitting room, staring at the ceiling and listening to the minute hum of electricity in the lamps, devises and walls. He wondered if Drake would bother telling him how disgustingly monstrous he was, or if he would be too nauseated to speak to Daken again. He wondered how long it would be before Pryde informed him that he needed to leave the school. He wondered if he’d spoken to Rachel for the last time.
They couldn’t take Zach away from him. The hearsay would be too weak on its own, and since Daken hadn’t given any names for ‘Mother’ or ‘Father’ or the village, there was nothing to definitively corroborate. Even knowing the right window of time to look in, if they went combing old microfiche for mentions of infanticide, they were likely to just come up with a few thousand legitimate and apocryphal Oni-Sanba references. So there was no legal action that could be taken. They couldn’t take away Zach; nobody could.

Maybe they could take away Laura though. What would she say? What would she think? At her most indoctrinated, killing children was where she’d drawn the line. That was what made her push back. That was the thing so utterly repugnant to her, it could break the most meticulously controlled conditioning money and guns could buy. She’d said she wouldn’t turn her back on him, but was there any way she could keep that promise if she knew about Jun?

It would be better to join him than find out. After Eimin and Uriel’s bodies had cooled, after the threads stitching the deathseed in Daken’s chest to them had broken one by one and the beatitude had faded, the anguish left in its wake had been more than abandonment or mourning. They’d stolen oblivion from him. It had been what he’d deserved, and in the very end, maybe what he’d wanted. They’d stolen his perfect silence, and then they’d left him alone.

Daken swallowed, squeezing his eyes shut and making a little sound in the back of his throat as his shoulders tensed and curled back for a moment, before he rolled onto his side and curled inward. He hiccupped. He wanted perfect silence back. Gambit would probably serve Zach’s interests better than he could anyway. That night on the beach in Georgia, he shouldn’t have hesitated; he could have walked into the sea with Johnny. Had he ever really wanted more than someone who would die with him? It was too late now, that ship had sailed, he’d never get such a good offer again. He wanted perfect silence, but he wanted it with someone’s hand in his.

Living or dying, a hand to hold was a fantasy. Only an abstract concept, but it fascinated him. Some vestigial longing left behind from the failure of his ‘parents’ and nanny to afford him adequate touch in the formative years. But lots of children were neglected, never had their most basic attachment needs met; exceedingly few of them killed anyone. There was something wrong with him much deeper than that. Daken opened his eyes, they felt wet, and stared blankly at one of his sofa’s feet. The psychopath angle had proved a red herring. They weren’t like him, they were another level entirely. But he knew something had already been wrong with him before Romulus came back and started adding to the stack.

He wished he knew what it was called. Label it, define it, conquer it. He couldn’t risk telling Ward about Jun though. Therapist-patient confidentiality was nullified in the event that the patient was a clear and present danger to children, wasn’t it? But maybe everybody would already know by tomorrow anyway. Drake had a responsibility to the students’ safety too. He had a responsibility to report what Daken was, and Daken couldn’t reasonably be upset about it. He didn’t think he could be upset about it even if he was being unreasonable. And underneath the selfishness and petulance, he knew they should take Zach away from him.

His breath caught and he squeezed his eyes shut again, feeling tears rim them as a strangled whine slithered out of his throat.

Chapter End Notes

So Reverend Stryker was not a ‘priest’ nor Catholic, but he was a preacher and
Christian (or Christianity-derivative cult). Bobby was raised Catholic but he isn't specifically upset with the Catholic church over that extremely shocking and traumatic week, he's been shaken and uncomfortable with strong Christian iconography in general, following multiple fatal attacks on the school from multiple crusader-styled hate-groups over, like, a two year period.

Not a lot of Marvel writers touch on Bobby's own relationship with religion, he's not one of the characters who we see expressing views on the topic on-page, so my impression is that away from his father he becomes lapsed-Catholic pretty quickly, and religion may be one of the things that he generally puts out of mind in his day-to-day life, mostly only surfacing when something stressful and related to that upbringing comes up. The fact that his father is devout and that Bobby can have a tendency to demure from confronting some socially awkward conversations makes me think he was tending to avoid the 'am I still Catholic' topic for a lot of years.
Bobby knelt on the floor, arms rested on the windowsill, chin rested on them. He’d pulled the shade up about a foot; putting darkness behind him instead of sandwiching himself between glass and the white-cream of the shade would hopefully make him slightly less visible, should anybody outside happen to look in his direction. Daken wasn’t moving around a lot. It didn’t seem like he was calling out as much instruction as usual. He looked bad. Like he wasn’t feeling well. Like he hadn’t slept. Or maybe Bobby was projecting, because sleep had been such illusive prey for himself.

Talking to Rictor had helped, but what Daken had told him yesterday was a lot to unpack. Was he making a bigger deal of it than it was? No, because Daken seemed to think it was a big deal. ‘You have a right to know what kind of creature you’d be inviting into your bed.’ Daken thought this defined ‘what’ he was. And he’d been living with that almost his entire life. Had letting go of agency and dissolving into Romulus’s control been in some way an escape from that? Detaching himself from a sense of humanity, seeing himself as an animal, a predator, had that made it easier? Had trying to regain his identity as a rational being brought the weight of the act suddenly back down on him like a ton of bricks?

Which meant that Bobby didn’t just need to figure out how to unpack this for himself. If he wanted to be part of Daken’s life, he needed to figure out how to help him come to terms with it too. That was terrifying. He was in no way competent to undertake something like that. But relationships weren’t about having one hundred percent of the right answers one hundred percent of the time, they were about support, right? Maybe what he’d need to do was just figure out how to push Daken toward the right help. And try try try to convince him that his entire existence wasn’t defined by something he did before he was old enough to understand it.

Daken sat on the floor beneath a window, staring blankly at the scuffed wood floor spread out before him. He heard the door open and swing back shut, but didn’t bother to look up. He recognized the gait a few seconds before the owner’s scent reached him. “… Are you stalking me?” he asked, throat feeling dry and voice coming out a bit rough, as she reached him and crouched.

“Stalking?” Braddock repeated.

“Why did you know I would be in here early, and furthermore, why did you care?” Daken demanded, eyes still on the floor.

“Are you aware that you look terrible?” Braddock asked. “Not just physically. You’ve got a ‘cloud’ today. I think Rachel’s worried, but she’s also quite busy, being an instructor and vice-
headmistress… I may as well make myself useful.”

Daken wrinkled his nose and cast her a mild glare. “How *generous* of you.”

“So is it a bit more self-sabotaging relationship angst? Has your little angel picked another fight? Maybe you’re having a deep contemplation of what a ruddy awful man you are, undeserving of redemption?” Braddock drawled.

Daken narrowed his eyes. “Is that what I am?”

“What you are is a very fickle, fragile paper-doll,” Braddock replied, tilting her head and raising an eyebrow at him. “All wrapped up now in self-loathing and anxiety like a thick blanket. So what’s set you off then?”

“... There’s something wrong with me,” Daken said quietly, continuing to glare contemptuously.

“There’s a *lot* wrong with you,” Braddock retorted. “Even more than most people.”

“Before everyone wanted to believe I was a lost cause, because that would make me easier to write off. Now everyone’s shifted over to believing that *everything* wrong with me came from Romulus, because *that* makes it easier to believe I can be repaired,” Daken grumbled, pulling his knees up close to him and turning his gaze out toward the floor again. “But there was something wrong with me before that.”

“Before Romulus?” Braddock asked. “I was under the impression he was there at your brutal cesarean section.”

“After which he left me with some unwitting pawns for almost ten years,” Daken retorted. “What was he going to do with a *baby?* He came back for me when I was *sturdy* enough to endure his ‘training’.”

Braddock hummed acknowledgement and shifted, settling down cross-legged on the floor. “And these pawns, what were they like?”

“Superstitious fools, ideal to completing the task as he wanted it done,” Daken said.

“More specifically?”

Daken frowned and turned a suspicious glare on her again. “*Why*?”

“You think there was something wrong with you before Romulus started grooming you,” Braddock replied with a shrug and an expression so neutral it seemed mocking. “So is the contention that you were born wrong, or that it’s the fault of these pawns? You know the current science suggests it’s probably a combination. A great lot of mental illnesses have a genetic predisposition, but the predisposition gets activated by environmental stresses.”

He kept frowning silently at her.

“Perhaps these pawns were simply *wonderful* people who took the best possible care of you, and you never shed a tear before the bogeyman came and took you away?” Braddock suggested.

“... *He* reviled confrontation. Anything objectionable he saw or heard from his neighbors, he’d pretend he didn’t,” Daken said quietly. “If he caught someone physically *beating* me, he might step in, but so long as their assaults remained verbal or at least minimal, he’d play blithe.” He gritted his teeth for a moment and swallowed. “*She* resented me. When I was four or five, my nanny explained...
that it was because I was the disgusting spawn of a whore and a sailor, and the color of my eyes brought disgrace upon any who could be associated with me. She told me that ‘Mother’ was a lady of refinement, but I made her look like half a woman when I was seen with her.”

“A ‘lady of refinement’,” Braddock repeated thoughtfully. “So these weren’t pros then.”

“No. They owned a large plantation and half the village,” Daken replied.

“Inherited, I suppose. If ‘he’ was so averse to confrontation, he couldn’t have been a particularly effective or competent landlord,” Braddock mused. “So then you were raised by trust-fund babies… ‘She’ resented you, did ‘he’?”

“… He was affectionate with his language, and he patted my shoulder now and again,” Daken said quietly.

“No hugs?”

“It was a different era. Harlow wouldn’t be published for a few years yet,” Daken replied with a dismissive shrug.

Braddock hummed again.

“What?” Daken growled, side-eyeing her.

“Well we’ve decided there was something wrong with you. If it’s one of the more common wrongnesses, then timing is rather relevant,” Braddock noted. “If we’re working upon the assumption that you’re not just a psychopath, of course.”

“I’m not. I tried that.”

Braddock raised an eyebrow at him. “You tried being a psychopath?”

“Yes.”

“Well. Had we not already been sure something was wrong with you...” Braddock wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “Of course sociopathy is now being differentiated as a learned sort of mimicry of psychopathic disposition and behavior, and you do have a machiavellian side... but sociopathy tends to show up in adolescence, which I’m hearing is too late?” She glanced back at him.

Daken narrowed his eyes and scoffed lightly.

“So something that you can retrospectively see present in your childhood, perhaps caused by a combination of genetic predisposition and incompetent, distant, disdainful caretakers,” Braddock said, clasping her hands over her ankles and leaning back against taut arms. “Attachment disorders, borderline, stress disorders, neuroses.” She sighed and tilted her head, giving a little shrug, then glanced back to meet his eyes. “How do you know there was ‘something wrong with you’?”

“Because that machiavellianism was already starting to bud before Romulus encouraged it to bloom,” Daken replied.

Braddock hummed, and stared into space for a moment. “When abouts?” she asked.

Daken shrugged slightly. “Maybe eight.”

“Oh that’s interesting,” Braddock nodded.
“Why?”

“Because it’s about the age a child grows a more or less complete understanding of empathy. Of course it’s still a simplistic understanding, the complexities of empathy continue to mature throughout adolescence,” Braddock explained. “They’ve already understood that other people have feelings comparable to but separate from their own, that’s a kindergarten revelation, but seven, eight that’s about when a child properly understands how feelings work and that they have the power to effect the feelings of others.” She turned and looked back at him. “It would be difficult to be a little ‘prince’ without that realization, so it makes sense you wouldn’t have been too deliberately machiavellian before that.”

“Fantastic,” Daken sneered, glancing away.

“How were you machiavellian as a child?”

“I wanted to hurt people.”

“The people who hurt you?” Braddock asked.

“Yes.”

“And if it was ‘machiavellian’, I suppose you opted for mind-games over punching them in the face,” Braddock noted, and then sighed. “Daken, there is most definitely something wrong with you… But being angry with the people who hurt you, wanting to make them feel what you’re feeling… that’s a very normal impulse for a child.”

“... I didn’t express it in ‘normal’ ways,” Daken said quietly.

“Because you’re not normal, there’s something wrong with you, we already established that,” Braddock reasoned dismissively. “But a child who’s been hurt acting out and being mean, that’s a very cliched narrative. It’s the responsibility of adults to take note of such behavior and correct the underlying causes. Of course the adults so often are the underlying causes, as it was for you, because you are a terrible cliche… You slipped through a very great many cracks, Daken.”

“... And if I hurt children?” Daken challenged.

“Then that too is a very great tragedy. I suppose you shall have to make it up by saving no less than ten times the number of children you hurt,” Braddock decided.

Daken glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. “So there’s a mathematical formula for redemption?”

Braddock shrugged. “I’m not the authority, but it seems a reasonable place to start. You do nobody any good by sulking over the past.”

Daken stared at her for a moment and then laughed bitterly, feeling sick. “You’re an idiot.”

“I was just thinking the same about you,” Braddock quipped. “You can punish yourself and accomplish nothing, or you can try to balance the scales through good works. Please yourself.”

Daken pulled his knees closer and hugged them, turning his head away from Braddock and resting a cheek on his knee. “The lesson isn’t for an hour. Leave me alone,” he said.

“Fine,” Braddock replied, climbing to her feet. “Sulk.”
Bobby walked into his shared office, pulled the door shut, and locked it.

“It’s office-hours, Bobby. The students are supposed to be able to drop in,” Kurt reminded him.

“The only kids who actually use office hours are the ones who need it the least,” Bobby replied with a shrug. Then, instead of going to his own desk, he walked over and dropped into the chair facing Kurt’s.

“Bobby?”

“So…” Bobby said, gut clenching, looking down at the top of Kurt’s desk. “I know your diaconate turned out to be a fake thing and all, but could we pretend it wasn’t for a minute?”

Kurt promptly shut his computer and pushed it to the side. “... Do you need to confess, Bobby?” he asked softly.

Bobby bit his lip for a moment. “Not ‘confess’ exactly… I need guidance… and total confidentiality,” he said.

“It’s yours.”

Bobby swallowed hard and closed his eyes. “Yesterday Daken decided that he needed to tell me about something that happened when he was a little kid… He killed someone. Before Romulus was directly controlling him.”

“Was Romulus not controlling him from the start?” Kurt asked.

“Indirectly. He left him with some foster-parents he’d picked out for a while, until his mutation kicked in,” Bobby explained, opening his eyes and leaning his elbows on Kurt’s desk, putting his chin in his hands. “So, there may have been some back-stage puppeteering, but he wasn’t beating Daken up yet.”

“I see.” Kurt nodded.

“I went and talked to Rictor about it last night, and we were kinda disagreeing, or not sure, about what exactly confirmation means… When does ‘innocence’ end?” Bobby asked.

“In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve ceased to be innocents when they ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and so a child ceases to be an innocent when they understand the meaning of good and evil,” Kurt said, then paused, wetting his lip. “Whether or not that age corresponds with confirmation isn’t well specified or unanimously agreed upon… What is the age in question?”

“Nine.”

“Nine,” Kurt repeated in a whisper, brow pinching as he put his knuckles to his chin, glancing vaguely downward. “That’s right in between, isn’t it…”

“In between what?” Bobby asked.

“Old enough he would have already developed essential reasoning skills and empathy, but too young for his mutation to manifest,” Kurt elaborated.

“It had manifested. Daken popped young,” Bobby corrected. “Does that make a difference?”

“Oh.” Kurt lifted his head a bit, looking thoughtful. “It’s not alleviating exactly, but increased
aggression is part of his mutation-grouping. It would probably be one of the first symptoms to show… A child that young experiencing it without any kind of guidance… That would certainly go a long way to explaining violent outbursts.”

“It… didn’t sound really violent… the way he described it. He…” Bobby cringed, heart sinking. “He sneaky-killed them.”

“Ah…” Kurt folded his arms on the desk and bit his lip, brow frowning.

“He was mad and scared, and it sounds like his foster-parents had explained reincarnation to him kinda… dumbed-down,” Bobby said, feeling sick.

“What do you mean?” Kurt asked, looking back up at him.

“Daken says he thought that if he killed this person, they’d just reappear somewhere far away and be out of his life,” Bobby elaborated.

“That’s…” Kurt groaned, cringing deeply. “... To be lazy about how you explain mortality to a child is…” He gave a sharp sigh and shook his head. “No, that’s probably unfair… Most people do not expect such a young child to have the capacity to kill, regardless of intent… And Daken is not the only small child to have ever proven that notion incorrect.”

“Does it change things?” Bobby asked, trying not to feel prematurely hopeful.

“... It could change his ability to understand death in its finality,” Kurt said slowly. “I’m not sure how fully any nine year old truly understands death, but if his foster-parents had subverted the very concept to him… he’d be very young to question faith… It’s twelve year olds who are known for their questions. A child younger than that, it may be fair to say their faith is much more blind.”

“Yeah,” Bobby agreed, looking down.

“... I think it would be very difficult for the church to reach any official opinion on these events, even if it were so inclined,” Kurt said quietly. “But I think also it is a product of ignorance rather than evil. The foster-parents were ignorant to how dangerous a mutant like Daken would be, even when small. They were perhaps ignorant that he was a mutant at all, or even to the existence of mutants entirely. And Daken was ignorant to the consequences of killing, because he had been given, as you say, a dumbed-down account of mortality.”

Bobby swallowed, his throat feeling tight. “... Am I wrong for thinking he didn’t understand, and he should be forgiven for not understanding?” he whispered.

“God forgives those who ask,” Kurt said gently. “And God is love in all its forms. If Daken asks forgiveness from those he loves, in good faith, I think it will be found.”

“And... And this isn’t a deal-breaker?” Bobby asked, looking hesitantly up. “Am I allowed to love him?”

Kurt met his eyes evenly. “Do you?” he asked.

“... Yeah,” Bobby squeaked past the lump in his throat.

“Then God must be with you,” Kurt said, reaching across the desk and pressing his fingertips to Bobby’s chest, over his heart. “That’s His blessing you feel.”

Bobby squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lip for a minute, then he swallowed and finally pushed
out, “Thank you.”

Daken lay on his back staring at the ceiling again. Nobody had confronted him all day. Which must mean that Drake hadn’t told anyone what he’d said. What he’d done. But how long could that last, really? He hadn’t slept, and hadn’t eaten half the calories needed to maintain his weight. He knew catabolysis wouldn’t wait long, the key drawback to a healing factor. But it was difficult to eat under the threat of constant nausea.

There was a knock, and Daken started so badly it hurt. He turned his head to stare at the door for a few seconds, swallowing. He achingly rolled over and climbed to his feet, walking leadenly to the door and pulling it open. Drake was standing there, with a bouquet in one hand and a boutique-looking shopping bag in the other. “Hi,” he said, looking and smelling intensely anxious.

“... Flowers?” Daken asked, numbly incredulous.

“They’re not for you exactly,” Drake said, and Daken was slightly taken aback at the level of pettiness in that.

“Of course not,” he said.

“So what you told me yesterday, I was thinking, that happened more than fifty years ago, right? And you still thought it was important, which, I thought, it seems like you must still be thinking a lot about it, and- and maybe feeling a lot of guilt and pain all this time,” Drake said, nervous stress in his voice, not quite meeting Daken’s eyes. “And- And if it’s still haunting you, then maybe part of you wants to be forgiven. But even though you told me, I’m not really the one you need forgiveness from.” He transferred the bouquet to the crook of his elbow and reached into the shopping bag as he babbled. “S-So... I got you a water-baby,” he said, glancing up at Daken with an expression of sheepish doubt as he pulled a Jizo-Bosatsu the size of a travel-mug out of the bag. “The internet says he needs a little knit cap, and that sounds like an Esty kind of thing, but- but I didn’t want to wait on that. I’ll find him a cap soon, but I thought... I wanted you to have him now.”

Daken held his hands up to accept the offering, feeling dazed. It was cool to the touch and solid-heavy as Drake set it gently in his hands. Actual stone. Machine-cut, surely, but not just some cheap porcelain or resin tchotchke. Daken rotated it slowly, staring down at the round, serenely smiling face. He cupped his hand around the side of its head and rubbed a thumb across the wide forehead. “... The flowers are for him?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” Drake agreed softly.

Daken looked back up at him, holding the statuette in both hands, close to his chest. “... They’ll need water,” he said, stepping back into the room, out of the way.

“R-Right,” Drake agreed, taking the cue and following him inside; he pushed the door gently shut behind him. “Do you have a-- Can we use that vase?” he asked, gesturing toward a Franz on the accent table.

“Yes,” Daken nodded, walking over and transferring the statuette to one hand as he picked up the vase.

“I can-- Do you want me to fill it?” Drake asked, following him a few steps.

Daken turned and held it out. “Thank you,” he murmured.
“Sure, no problem,” Drake replied, taking hold of the vase with his free hand.

Daken didn’t let go, and Drake looked up at him questioningly when the vase wasn’t quite relinquished to him. “... Thank you,” Daken repeated.

A small, hesitant smile curled Drake’s lips. “... You’re welcome,” he whispered, as Daken let go of the vase.

Chapter End Notes

Betsy isn't counselor material these days (I suppose debatable whether she ever was; we know she was doing mindfulness exercises and dream-walks into Warren, but that's in more of a girlfriend-who-is-helping capacity.) She is a person who's learned a lot about psychology though, both 'normal' psychology and magical-bullshit psychology. I think she's got a bit of bully in her while she's reeling from weird-bullshit-dysphoria. She's been a good, genuinely likable person in the past (Exiles/New Exiles may have been her acme on the 'someone I would like and trust' scale) so I'm not trying to make her a cold bitch, more mixing British sardonicism into a slurry of impatience, insecurity and penance.

Kurt's fake-diaconate was a storyline from the early 00s, when the Church of Humanity (splinter-sect that was angry at the Catholic church and also mutants) somehow tricked him into thinking he was going through the legitimate steps for the priesthood track. He did not pursue going through those steps all over again under the proper authorities, but he did run the chapel at Worthington Industries SF compound and Utopia. It seems like his sermons biased toward being more warm-and-fuzzy than the strict party line, because, y'know, it's Kurt. Emma referred to his chapel as the only one she'd ever willingly enter.

Mizuko "water-baby" is the old term for a stillborn baby or one that died quickly following birth, now also applied to miscarriages and terminations. The 'unborn children' have a patron Bodhisattva, Jizo, who watches over their souls. The funerary rituals for the unborn are special (similar to how Christian funerals for babies and small children are white instead of black) and the unborn have their own section in temples, where their monument stones are baby-sized statues of Jizo-Bosatsu that are dressed in bonnets/caps and bibs (real, not part of the carved statue).
There's plenty baggage to go around.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning:
- Self-harm

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bobby leaned against the wall, knuckles of one hand pressed to his mouth and staring at the floor as he felt intensely awkward. Daken had been sitting silently in front of the little corner table where the water-baby Buddha and the flowers were arranged for ten minutes or so. He wasn’t in a formal-looking kneeling posture, but rather something a little more like the joints in his knees had gone to jelly and crumpled under him. His hands weren’t folded in any way; his arms falling limply to the sides. He was sitting upright, but there was a lot of ragdoll there anyway. When Bobby asked if he should leave, Daken had said ‘no’, but he hadn’t said anything since then, just stared at the little stone face.

Finally he moved, twisting a little and looking back at Bobby over his shoulder. There was a painful hollowness in his expression. “... I can’t,” he whispered.

Bobby’s throat squeezed with a pang of sympathetic anguish. He pushed away from the wall and walked over, settling down next to Daken and putting a hand on his arm. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s nothing there.” Daken looked down, hunching his shoulders a little. “I’ve been dead. There’s nothing there. There’s no heaven, hell, purgatory, limbo... Jun doesn’t exist anymore.”

Bobby slid his hand down and reached out with the other as well, finding Daken’s and wrapping it in both of his. “But if there was something there, we’re not supposed to know about it, right? Because knowing about the empirical facts could throw a wrench into whatever the plans are for, like, mortal morality or something, right?” he reasoned softly. “So even if you were some place in between, whoever’s in charge wouldn’t let you leave with the knowledge, right? They’d take those memories out so you’d wake up with just a blank space.”

Daken swallowed and tilted his head just a little to the side; he didn’t look comforted, but seemed to acknowledge the logic. For once, Bobby was thankful Daken was so into argumentative logic. “The Lethe... The Mi-hun-t’ang...” he murmured.

“You’re saying some words,” Bobby noted.

“Waters of oblivion,” Daken sighed.

“Okay, so maybe there could be something there and you don’t remember,” Bobby said, squeezing his hand. “I’m sorry if I put you on the spot. Maybe- Maybe he can just stay here in case you ever wake up some day and think it’d feel right to talk to him.”

Daken nodded and swallowed.

A few minutes passed in silence. Bobby chewed on his lip and stared blankly in the direction of the baseboards. The dead air started to get intolerable, and all the other stuff he needed to say was
clamoring at the starting gate, a dozen things trying to push through at once. “... I thought about the other thing you said… About your question,” Bobby said, looking back up at Daken.

Daken’s head lifted slightly and he glanced sideways at him.

About if I like you partly because of your powers,” Bobby clarified. “I think- I think my back-of-my-head relationship with your powers is a ‘despite’ and not a ‘because of’.”

“... ‘Despite’,,” Daken breathed, and Bobby saw his eyes widen a little and his mouth stay slightly open, taking on a downward angle.

“Nonononono, wait!” Bobby gasped, heart in his throat. “That’s not-- I didn’t mean-- I just- I just-- I got fucked around with by an empath once and it- it was just really upsetting.”

Daken looked away quickly, his breaths becoming audible, staggered, shaking.

“And just- just on top of that, there’s the shit that went down with Raven and Opal, and... it seems like every time somebody screws with my head it turns into somebody trying to kill me and coming really close to succeeding,” Bobby floundered.

“You think I’m trying to screw with your head?” Daken whispered. It wasn’t a hiss or a growl, there wasn’t the anger that should have been in his voice, there was something much worse.

“No! No, that’s-- It’s not a thinking-thought,” Bobby protested. “It’s paranoia. It’s back-of-my-head stuff that I’m just- just trying to unpack and deal with. It’s not--”

“Get out,” Daken gasped, pulling his hand sharply away from Bobby’s.

“I don’t think you’re doing anything to me,” Bobby said in a rush, panicking. “It’s irrational paranoia because of things that other people--”

“Get out!” Daken said again, volume rising but still ragged and breathless. He dragged himself to his feet and staggered back a few steps, away from the impromptu shrine. His head was tilted down and to the side, refusing to look at Bobby.

“I wasn’t trying to put you in that group! I’m trying to work on myself and I’m trying to communicate!” Bobby explained desperately, getting up and reaching out.

Daken swatted his approaching hand away quickly; he hit it with the side of his wrist, and as his arm reached the end of its arc and stilled, Bobby could see that Daken’s claws were out by about two inches, his fingers curled in a painfully stiff-looking way. He was shaking. “I need you to get out! I need you to not be here! I need to be alone right now!” he near-shouted, looking back up at him, his eyes wide and desperate. It was maybe the clearest communication he’d ever given Bobby, even if it left a lot in question.

“Okay. Okay. I’m sorry,” Bobby whispered, taking a step away. “I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean-- I really don’t believe you’re manipulating me. I wasn’t trying to imply that.”

“Just go,” Daken forced through his teeth. “I can’t-- I need you to go.”

“Okay,” Bobby said, reminding himself of the stairs and wondering if arguing might be the worst thing to do when Daken was giving him specific ‘I need’ statements. He hurried to the door. “I’m sorry,” he said, glancing back over his shoulder, Daken wasn’t looking at him now, and slipped out into the hall, pulling the door shut behind him. Then he stillled, biting his lip. After a minute, he froze his guts; maybe it was a crutch, and he knew Daken definitely hated it, but he couldn’t
handle how hard his heart was beating right now, how much it hurt, how much the acid was trying
to crawl up his throat. He closed his eyes and tried to force the lingering feelings down. It left
enough room to think. It left enough room for a new, dark, quiet fear to seep in around the edges.
Was it just paranoia too?

He turned and jogged past three doors, skidding to stop in front of one and knocking hard.
“Rachel?” he called, hearing a desperate note in his own voice. “Are you in there? It’s important!”
He waited, feeling jittery despite his frozen guts. No response came. Bobby spun around and ran
across the hall, beating the side of his fist against it before he’d even stopped moving. “Kitty? Are
you there? Is Rachel? Do you know where she is?”

A few seconds later the door unlatched; when Bobby pushed it in Kitty was halfway across the
little livingroom, demanding, “What’s wrong?” Rachel was climbing off the couch and struggling
out from under an afghan, some movie or Netflix paused on the TV.

“I--” Bobby hesitated, because he wasn’t entirely sure. “I kind of just had a word-vomit accident,
and Daken’s takeaway was definitely not what I was trying to imply at all, and he got really upset
and- and--”

Kitty groaned loudly, rolling her eyes and grimacing. “Bobby, you putting your foot in your mouth
does not constitute and emergency.”

“No, listen, just- just-- I don’t know, I just got a bad feeling--”

“You think he’s going to hurt himself,” Rachel said; her voice wasn’t loud, but it drown out
everything and felt horribly heavy.

Bobby stared at her, he could feel his hands trembling and the ice inside him trying to creep
outward. “I don’t know,” he whispered, and it felt like a lie now, because Rachel saying it out loud
had made it suddenly very clear and real.

“He’s in his room?” she asked in an uncomfortably calm voice as she navigated around Kitty and
him and out into the hall.

“Y-Yeah,” Bobby agreed, turning after her.

“Stay,” Rachel commanded, walking out and away.

Bobby bit down on his lip and stayed planted, watching her go and trying to decide if she was mad
at him. He blinked and glanced at Kitty when she held up her hand, an inch from his face. “W-
What?”

She was giving him a look that was difficult to read as he met her eyes. “You’re only breathing,
like, once a minute,” she answered, and then glanced at her hand, still hovering near his mouth.
“And that was pretty damn cold.”

Bobby cringed, glancing away. “... Was kind of afraid I might regular-vomit,” he muttered.

“What did you say?” Kitty asked, catching his arm and tugging him into the room another step as
she pushed the door shut and then called at the puck sitting on the TV credenza, “Alexa, turn off
the TV.”

Bobby pushed a hand through his hair, squirming in place a little. “He wanted to know how I felt
about his powers,” he said quietly. “And I was trying to be full-disclosure honest and admit that
I’ve got some paranoia about it, and- and I mentioned Josette, and I... I maybe didn’t, like, preface
well enough first about how I know that it is paranoia, so by the time I started back-pedaling he’d already taken it as accusatory.” He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. “And I think I did manage to get that across, but by then he was already maybe... having a panic-attack or something... So he said he needed me to leave…”

Kitty put her face into her hands and whined. “Why would you bring up Josette?”

“Because I was trying to be honest,” Bobby snapped back at her. “It does freak me out. But I’m trying to work through it. I told him I was trying to work through it.” He bit his lip hard for a few seconds and then shook his head. “And I’m pretty sure he believed me. He didn’t get mad. He just- He just said that he needed me to not be there.”

Kitty sighed, looking away and chewing on a knuckle.

“... Did I actually do something wrong here, or did I just talk in the wrong order?” Bobby asked, studying the carpet.

Kitty was quiet for a moment, seeming to think about it. “No. You didn’t do anything wrong. I think that was a conversation you needed to have,” she decided. “If it’s something you’re having trouble with… Daken’s senses would definitely be able to pick up that something was making you nervous, so… it’s better to have it out in the open, and maybe it’s better to work through it together, instead of just thinking of it as something you need to fix by yourself.”

Bobby breathed out a cold, shaky breath. “... Thanks. I- I wasn’t a hundred percent sure after- after he got so rattled,” he whispered.

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Daken dropped into the bathtub before it was half full, staring unfocused at the fixtures and adjusting the temperature to just shy of scalding as he let the tide rise around him. It was creeping up over his lower ribs when he heard a knock on the outer door of his suite. He ignored it. Seconds later, short enough that it was obvious a response hadn’t been expected, Rachel’s voice called over the speaker, “Daken, I’m coming in.” He didn’t respond or move or shift his gaze from blurry study of the fixtures ahead of him. His ears registered the sound of the main door opening and closing, then footsteps in the front room, curving their way toward the bathroom without hesitation, the sound of running water undoubtedly clear enough. The door to his right opened and Rachel walked quietly in.

“Rude,” Daken whispered.

“I guess so,” Rachel agreed, gliding across the tiles and sitting down utop the closed lid of the toilet. “A bath, huh?”

“I’m Japanese. It’s a bathing culture,” Daken retorted without any energy.

“Sure,” Rachel said, and then was quiet for a minute. “... You prefer cutting in the bath?”

“The cleanup is easier,” Daken said, watching the very edge of the waterline as it climbed. “... It’s satisfying, the way the water turns red… Makes it look like more.”

“Uhuh.” A couple minutes passed. “... Bobby’s worried about you,” Rachel said.

Daken’s stomach clenched. He didn’t respond. The water was lapping halfway up his bicep.

“He was pretty upset. He knew he hurt you,” Rachel added.
“No,” Daken replied.

“No’ you don’t think he understood, or ‘no’ he didn’t hurt you?” Rachel asked.

“There’s nothing to be ‘hurt’ about,” Daken said, shaking his head very slightly.

“And maybe ‘hurt’ is the wrong word? How about ‘unnerved’?”

Daken stared blankly at the juncture of water and enamel for a few minutes. “... I have ‘villain’ powers,” he noted quietly. “... Rapist powers.”

“... Sure. So do I.”

Daken blinked a few times and then turned to look at her, eyes finally focusing. She stared back at him impassively. “... How do you reconcile?”

“I try to avoid raping people,” Rachel replied.

Daken held her eyes for another minute before looking back at the water. “I picked up a lot of patsies under false identities. Used them and then disposed of them,” he said.

“Yeah, you’ve definitely had some issues with the murder thing,” Rachel agreed. “Did you use your pheromones to overwhelm any of them, or did you use your senses to weed out who was likely to take a shine to you and then send them a few strategic smiles and winks?”

“... The latter, bolstered by some encouragement from my pheromones,” Daken said quietly. “... My powers are limited to suggestion, outright control is a bit beyond me… It usually worked best to seek out someone predisposed to be amenable, and then use pheromones to catch their attention.”

“Depending on who you ask, sleeping with someone under false pretenses can be considered sexual assault regardless of whether they say ‘yes’,” Rachel noted quietly. “It’s a question of defining the ‘informed’ part of ‘informed consent’, I guess… You manipulated a lot of people, you killed a lot of people, but I feel like that’s a topic that’s been rehashed its fair share, and you were ostracized for it,” she mused slowly. “And that’s... It’s a problematic question, isn’t it? Dad offered amnesty and a do-over to the mutant race, but excluded you because the antisocial behaviors you’d been taught made you too dangerous? The whole of mutantity was, is, ostracized for being ‘too dangerous’.”

“... Because it wasn’t my powers that were the problem, it was how I used them,” Daken murmured, leaning forward and turning off the tap as the waterline reached the overflow-check.

“Magneto used his powers to destroy buildings and hijack military weapons,” Rachel retorted, and then in a softer voice added, “Dad made a bad call.”

“Off topic,” Daken sighed, leaning back and lifting his hands above the water, studying them.

“The Black Widow was a honeypot. That’s how she got the codename,” Rachel noted. “She was brainwashed from childhood to manipulate and seduce and kill just like you. But she broke her programming, walked away, and became one of the most iconic and respected Avengers. So what’s the difference?”

“She didn’t use powers.”

“Because she didn’t have them,” Rachel replied easily. “If she had, you can bet your ass the Red Room would have trained her to make use of them.”
Daken unsheathed the dewclaw on his left hand. “So I’m not responsible for what I’ve done?” he asked softly.

“You’ve taken responsibility,” Rachel corrected. “You’ve taken the time to contemplate and recognize what was wrong with the things you were taught, not just to let other people tell you that they were wrong. You’ve taken agency and responsibility for your rehabilitation… If correcting yourself and taking a different path forward didn’t matter, then you may as well be dead.”

“Tried that. Couldn’t hold it,” Daken said, and drew a slow, weeping line up the inside of his right arm from elbow to wrist.

“You’ve made decisions, made an effort, to have a positive impact on the lives of the people around you this year,” Rachel said softly.

“That doesn’t mean I deserve nice things,” Daken whispered, zigzagging back downward.

“So you should live in a constant state of penance?” Rachel asked.

“... You ask as I self-mutilate.”

Rachel was quiet for a while as Daken drew parallel lines on his arm. He dunked it in the water when he found that he couldn’t see his work clearly, washing the canvas clean, and started over. “... I was responsible for a lot of deaths,” Rachel finally said, her voice faint, a slight hint of congestion at the edge of it. “Sometimes I killed them myself... sometimes with my powers, sometimes with my hands and teeth... And sometimes I lead death to them, and they suffered a worse fate.”

Daken paused, staring at his most recent cut as it zipped itself shut.

“I used telepathy to invade the minds of the mutants I was hunting, to tear their psyches apart, to reenact little pieces of my own trauma upon them... Things the Shadow King did to me, to make me a hound,” she continued, her voice wavering, her pulse agitated. “... I raped dozens.”

Daken stayed silent and still.

“I’ve been told that I wasn’t responsible for the things I did when I was brainwashed. How valid is that? I’m not sure. I don’t know. But why is the level of responsibility different if somebody’s skinny and little than it is if somebody looks robust?” she asked, voice just a little above a whisper. “... I’m stronger than you. You might be able to beat me at arm-wrestling, but with powers figured in, I’m stronger than you by a longshot... But everybody instantly absolved me because I showed up here looking like a drown kitten.”

“Because you followed their rules,” Daken suggested.

“No I didn’t,” Rachel countered. “Not- Not at first... Not for a few years... Being cut free from your abuser, you’re not just instantly fine. You repeat the same behavior, just in different directions. Some of it directed at yourself, some of it at anybody who reminds you of your abuser... There’s still a need to be violent. It’s even stronger than before. Killing isn’t just what you do, it’s what you need to do. To make sense of it, you have to find somebody who deserves to feel the things that you did to all the people who didn’t.”

“But they kept forgiving you?”

“Some of them,” Rachel agreed softly, and then a short, sickly laugh came out through her teeth. “... You believe your father’s more forgiving with girls?”
Daken frowned, and then turned to look at her again and found Rachel’s eyes waiting for him. “Isn’t he?”

“... He tried to put me down like a mad dog too,” she whispered. “... I survived by the skin of my teeth. And then I went away for a while. Worked on myself. Got myself together a bit.”

They stared silently, stillly, into each other’s eyes for a few minutes. Finally Rachel pushed herself to her feet, walked two steps and knelt down next to the tub. She reached out, catching Daken’s hand and wrapping it in hers, and brought his knuckles gently against her cheek.

“Daken, I was worse than you,” she said softly, still staring him in the eye. “I was more destructive. And I did a few very questionable things to the people who were trying to help me.” She took a slow, shaking breath, and closed her eyes. “I don’t know if I deserve nice things, maybe that’s up to whatever ‘higher powers’ there might be... But I want nice things... My heart aches for them.”

Daken stayed still another minute, then leaned toward Rachel, to sniff at her over the scent of his own blood. “... You were with her tonight but not with her,” he murmured.

“... Rude,” Rachel replied with a small, fragile chuckle.

“If you think you deserve her--”

“I don’t know what anybody deserves,” Rachel corrected. “I’m not sure if I believe that anybody deserves anything.”

“Is this pep-talk hypocrisy?” Daken challenged.

Rachel sighed and shook her head. “Recent circumstances make it complicated right now... And I don’t want to be a rebound,” she said.

Daken leaned back again and let his head fall back. “... You’re going to make me stop cutting myself?” he asked.

“That’s up to you.” Rachel shrugged, letting his hand go and climbing up off her knees. “But I’m not going to leave until you’re done with the bath. I won’t let you faint and drown yourself.”

Daken stared blankly at the ceiling as he listened to her resettle herself on the lid of the toilet again. “... A few more minutes?” A few more cuts.

“Okay.”

“... Rachel?” he called softly, holding his hands up again and looking blankly at his palms.

“Mhm?”

“Did you ever kill children?” Daken slipped a single claw across the opposite palm and on down its wrist.

“... Yes,” Rachel whispered.

“... What do you do with that?” Daken asked.

“Everything I can to make sure this world doesn’t turn into the one I came from,” Rachel said. “Just like you’ll do everything you can to protect these children from the things that were done to you and the mistakes you made because of it.”
“... Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Even if you have read all the X-Books from the early 00s, chances are you don't remember Josette because she was so minor in the scheme of X-Books, but this girl's the reason Jean-Paul never got Bobby on a date. They were literally walking out the door (admittedly, Bobby hadn't actually realized they'd just been set up on a date) when this manipulative Genoshan-refugee empath walks up, yoinks Bobby, and works him over with powers and wiles because her hobby is making men fight over her. She packs so many uncomfortable tropes into such a small appearance! I think she's only in two issues ever, maybe three, but she manages to be very cringe in that short time.

As for Opal and Raven, Opal's baby got kidnapped by her boss who forced her to trick Bobby into coming to Hong Kong to face said boss (perhaps in a... boss-battle?) and Raven? Bobby decided on the heels of M-Day that dating Mystique would be fine. What could possibly go wrong? I'm sure it was fine. Definitely no problems there.
Bobby's dinner plans get derailed again.

Chapter Notes

**Trigger Warning:**
- Self-harm

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A little was after six in the morning, Bobby sat down on the main stairs, settled on the top step, off to the side, leaving plenty of room to pass him. He leaned his arms against his knees and waited quietly. The front door opened, and Daken walked in from his usual early morning run; his steps slowed a couple yards before he reached the base of the stairs as hr noted Bobby’s presence and looked up at him.

“I won’t bug you too much or anything. I just.. I just wanted to check if you’re okay,” Bobby said softly.

Daken stared back quietly for a moment and then lifted his hand and gestured vaguely at Bobby. “Be ice,” he said.

Bobby iced up obediently but otherwise didn’t move.

Daken climbed the steps and then sat down at the top, about a yard between them, setting his gaze blankly straight ahead of him. “... No matter how many times you ask, I’m not going to be okay-okay, you know,” he said quietly.

“No I- I get that,” Bobby said, shaking his head and feeling frustrated.

“Do you?” Daken asked, turning his head and looking at Bobby, his expression doubting and slightly pained. “Do you believe that once we understand each other better, I’ll stop hearing things you didn’t say and reacting irrationally?”

“I…” Bobby faltered, trying to decide if he was supposed to say that Daken didn’t do that sort of thing.

“It’s not like… when you read a disgusting anonymous political opinion and get offended,” Daken said quietly, looking down and away. “... On a bad day, the person that I’m looking at is fundamentally different in every way I can perceive from the same person on a good day.”

Bobby looked down for a minute or two, processing that. He quelled the reflexive feeling that he understood what that meant, because he had to assume Daken wasn’t being at all metaphorical or embellishing the statement. He wasn’t just talking about the blues versus a rose tinted glasses. “... Like… a nightmare gets out of your head and the person you’re trying to talk to is wearing it?” he asked.

Daken seemed to consider that for a few seconds. “... I guess.” He shrugged slightly.

“It doesn’t seem like Laura or Rachel set that off for you too much though,” Bobby noted.

“Their absence does sometimes,” Daken whispered. “When I start telling myself they’re never
coming back. That they don’t want me anymore. That they never did… And… And I start hating them for it.”

Bobby felt a heavy pang at that despite being in ice-form. “Daken--”

“Don’t. Don’t bother trying to correct me. I know it’s stupid,” Dake said tightly, giving a sharp shake of his head.

“Okay, but… maybe I’m behind the curve and a bit slow, but I am starting to pick up on what things freak you out,” Bobby said, watching him. “And maybe that’s mostly because I keep running into them at a hundred miles an hour, but- but I feel like it’s been getting better, hasn’t it? Like I’m not making you go into panic-mode as often at least.”

“You’re viewing this as an ‘it’ll get easier’ proposition?” Daken sighed, closing his eyes. “Isn’t that about as valid as believing that marriage will change someone?”

“No, I’m viewing this as…” Bobby rummaged around for the right words. “That I could be one of the people who helps you through it.”

“Do you think charity is a good foundation for a relationship?” Daken asked. There wasn’t the venom in his voice that Bobby thought normally would have accompanied a question like that; he just sounded tired.

“I think I learn more about myself when I’m talking to you, if you’re yelling at me or if you’re calm, than with anybody I’ve ever known,” Bobby replied, looking back over at him. “Maybe I grow more around you. Maybe partly because you’re not afraid to be mean when I deserve it.”

“I’m rarely afraid to be mean,” Daken said, then closed his eyes and sighed slowly. “Maybe you’re just an emotional-masochist.”

“I guess I can’t totally rule that out,” Bobby said with shrug and a little smirk, glancing away. “I already have plans for tonight, but do--”

“So have I,” Daken cut him off with a quick sharpness that gave Bobby whiplash.

“I- I’m sorry,” Bobby stammered, reeling. Defensive. Did he feel like he was being shoved to the back-burner after making himself vulnerable? “Do you need me to cancel? Do you need…?” he floundered.

“With Bellona,” Daken’s voice dropped to something barely above a whisper; he was staring at the steps below them now with an expression somewhere between frustration and embarrassment. “She asked for one-on-one time.”

“Oh, that’s- that’s great,” Bobby said, hesitantly relieved. “It’s really great that she has you. To help her get through things, and in general,” he babbled, glancing away. “But, um, on Saturday, are you--”

“I really-- I--” Daken faltered, pushing himself abruptly to his feet. His voice stayed quiet and didn’t have the sharpness this time. “I need to get ready for the morning session.”

“Y-Yeah, of course, sorry,” Bobby mumbled, heart sinking a little despite being frozen. “I didn’t mean to keep you.”

“It’s fine.” Daken shook his head and stepping up onto the landing. “I’ll…” he trailed off and his feet paused reluctantly for a moment. “Later,” he said quietly.
“... Okay,” Bobby whispered, watching him walk away.

Bellona wasn’t sure how Daken had managed to convince Zach to go on the movie-night excursion with his peers, her impression was that he didn’t get along with the other students. She didn’t have any strong feelings against Zach, but his presence could be rather tiring, and she was glad to be free of his proclivity for complaints and the smell of his jealousy for a while.

A smart-speaker sat on the end-table refrigerator, playing sardonic lyrics sung by mournful female voices. A large bowl of kettlecorn and a collection of makeup had been pushed to one end of the coffee table to make space for cards as Daken explained blackjack and Bellona tried to understand card-counting. She could feel the mascara every time she blinked; she couldn’t quite imagine living every day painted and sticky like this and had to make a conscious effort not to scrub at it with her knuckles. Daken seemed perfectly comfortable though, and his calm voice and sweet scent remained one of the most soothing presences she’d known in her short life.

“The count-value for the highs is minus one as they’re played because they’re being taken out of play,” Daken explained as he pressed a finger against the jack he’d just laid down. “The essence of any counting strategy is keeping track of what’s been taken away.”

Bellona nodded, watching his hands as he pulled cards from the stack and flipped them to show her.

“If a low card is taken away, then that’s advantageous. If a high card is taken away, then that’s a detriment. Therefore positive cards having already been played is negative, and negative cards having already been played is positive,” he paraphrased.

“Yes,” Bellona nodded again.

“The neutral cards we don’t look at except in the context of ‘meaningful pairs’,” Daken said. “That’s a strategy of simplifying the count by... by...” he faltered.

Bellona looked up and frowned. His eyes had gone distant and his expression faded, as she watched, into a relaxed blank. “... Daken?” she called.

“... He’s here,” he whispered, and let the cards he’d been holding fall carelessly to the table’s surface.

“Who?” Bellona asked, confused and worried by the sudden shift in Daken’s demeanor and scent.

“He’s come for me,” Daken mumbled, not answering or even seeming to hear her question, as he climbed to his feet.

“... Daken?” Bellona called again, watching him walk to the door, detached from the world around him in a disturbingly hypnotic serenity. She watched him open the door and walk out into the hall. She kept staring as it swung shut behind him, not deliberately put back in place but simply weighted to close itself when not otherwise held. “... Brother?” she whined softly in the empty room.

Something was wrong. Something was wrong with him. Should she follow? Should she get help? From his own cryptic words, it sounded as though someone was doing this to her brother. Controlling him. Taking him from her.

Bellona bit her lip and got up. She hesitated a few more seconds before walking to the door.
Bobby threw a slide down the main staircase that sublimated a few feet behind him as he skated down and hopped with a flourish to land in front of Warren. “How am I the best you could do on a Friday night?” he asked, grinning up at his friend.


“All-you-can-eat shrimp buffet?”

“Vetoed.” Warren wrinkled his nose. “If you want shrimp, we can go somewhere that puts quality and freshness above quantity and salmonella.”

“You’re so picky. Why are you so picky?” Bobby scoffed.

“Because I can afford to be?” Warren hummed and patted his back firmly before letting Bobby go. “So is it seafood then?”

“Actually, let’s go Italian,” Bobby decided. “I have too much gossip to catch you up on to be worrying about shelling.”

“Ooh, I can’t wait,” Warren chuckled, sliding his hands into the pockets of his suit jacket as they walked out the front entrance together. They were a few yards past the porch when Bobby heard the door open again behind them and started to glance over his shoulder.

“Lord?”

He and Warren both turned fully and went still, staring, as Daken walked out, eyes glued to Warren and his expression, body-language, even his gait were just wrong. “... Daken, what’s... up?” Bobby asked, a sick feeling settling into his stomach as Daken came closer, and in the walkway lights, and with enough lingering evening sunlight to augment them, he could see that Daken’s eyes were red, not bloodshot, red.

He walked right up and stopped next to Warren, looking up at him with an expression that had a shiver-wrenching serenity to it. “How can I serve your vision?” Daken asked without the slightest trace of sarcasm.

Warren stared back at him, cold horror etched on his face. It took him more than a minute to find his voice, and Bobby wasn’t doing any better. “... I’m thirsty, Daken. Get me water. Now,” Warren said with a commanding tone that turned Bobby’s stomach even more.

“Yes, Lord,” Daken responded immediately and turned, going back the way he’d come with a purposeful sort of haste.

Bobby stared after him as Daken disappeared back into the school. He was shaken out of his horrified trance by Warren grabbing his arm a little too hard as he turned back to Bobby. “Once I get out of his range, he may snap out of it,” he said, words clipped and voice urgent. “If he doesn’t, get Betsy. She’ll- She’ll know what to do.” It sounded like there was an unspoken ‘I hope’ on the end of that statement.

“Ohay...” Bobby whispered, nodding.

“I’ll call you later,” Warren promised, unfurling his wings. A moment later he was airborne and zooming away fast.
Bobby stared after him for a few seconds and then jumped as the front doors were flung open again with a crack. He whipped around to see Daken running out, wide-eyed and obviously distressed. “MY LORD!” he shouted at the sky, eyes snapping up to Warren’s disappearing silhouette. “LORD ARCHANGEL!”

“Daken. Daken, hey,” Bobby called, catching him. He iced up in case Daken got stabby, but tried to keep his grip gentle. “Hey, calm down. It’s okay.”

“MY LORD, WHERE ARE YOU GOING?!” Daken wailed. He sounded, and looked, downright agonized.

“Daken, look at me. Look at me. You have to calm down,” Bobby urged, catching his jaw and trying to turn Daken’s head as he squirmed and attempted to shrug Bobby off. He could hear other voices, people opening windows, coming out the door, trying to see what the screaming was about, but he couldn’t pay attention to them. “Daken--”

“LORD, WHY--” Daken started to scream and then cut off with a pained, guttural sound and clutched his chest, knees buckling.

“Daken!” Bobby caught him, easing Daken down to his knees and staring, breath catching for a moment as he saw Daken’s lips turn blue. Not hypothermia-blue, deep indigo. “Daken, calm down, it’s gonna be okay,” Bobby whispered, trying to follow his own advice as he held onto him firmly with one arm while he pressed a hand to Daken’s chest. He closed his eyes and felt for the heat of the deathseed smoldering in Daken’s chest, screwing with his mind and trying to change his body.

“N-No... Stop...” Daken choked, trembling and pulling weakly at Bobby’s wrist.

“Shhhh... It’s going to be okay,” Bobby whispered, concentrating hard, trying to force the deathseed back into dormancy without freezing the flesh around it or causing Daken any more discomfort than the deathseed was already putting him in.

Daken struggled and made little, upset sounds for another minute as Bobby drained every last trace of heat out of the deathseed, and then kept hold of him after he was finished. Bobby could hear the murmur of people talking around him, but didn’t pay attention until feet stopped next to them and someone started talking to him. “Bobby, what happened?” Kitty’s voice asked.

“... Warren came over... We were supposed to hang out,” Bobby said quietly, lifting his head to look up at her and defrosting. “And Daken, the deathseed, it reacted to him... I don’t know if... maybe he has the same aura as the twins or something?”

Kitty put a hand to her mouth and bit her knuckle for a moment, staring into the distance and looking worried. She nodded and then looked down again. “Daken? Are you... okay?” she called.

“... Why?” Daken whispered desolately, head lowered, staring at the steps beneath him.

Bobby bit his lip, gut twisting as he looked down at Daken for a moment and then glanced back up at Kitty. “Is Rachel here?”

Kitty shook her head. “She went somewhere with Betsy... I’ll call.”

“No, it’s-- We can handle this,” Bobby decided. Daken wasn’t screaming at the sky anymore. And the Death part of the program was over. He glanced up and noticed that there were a lot of people on the porch or in the doorway or hanging out of windows, watching. Bobby winced. “Hey, Daken, come on, let’s go upstairs,” he urged, pulling Daken a little tighter against his side and lifting them both to their feet. Having been there before, Bobby was pretty sure Daken would rather be having
his post-Apocalyptic existential crisis not in public.

“... Why did he go?” Daken whined softly as Bobby guided him back toward the door.

“He probably just had stuff to do. Warren’s a busy guy,” Bobby replied, trying not to look anybody in the eye. But then white caught his peripheral, and he looked up to find Bellona standing pressed against the side of one door. She was wearing fabulous glam-rock makeup and a blank expression. She looked back at Bobby for a few seconds and then turned suddenly and dashed off. Crap. After everything Bellona had been through, seeing her brother like this was definitely not a helpful thing. “Kitty,” he called, looking over his shoulder. “I got this. Can you check on Bell?”

“Yeah,” Kitty agreed, taking off after her.

Bobby was sure he could feel the stares until they were safely inside Daken’s room with the door shut behind them. Bobby let out a sigh through his nose and shook his head. “So--”

“Why doesn’t he want me?” Daken whispered, and Bobby’s gut twisted again as he felt Daken’s shoulders start trembling. “What did I do wrong?”

“Daken, Warren doesn’t want any horsemen,” Bobby said, stepping to face him and shifting his hands, without breaking contact, to rest one on Daken’s side and catch his jaw with the other, lifting his face. Then Bobby stared for a moment, wondering how the hell he hadn’t noticed the eyeliner and shadow before. Must have been too distracted by the scary red eyes. But God damn, he was pretty. Even crying. Shit, he was crying. “It’s not you,” Bobby tried to assure him, gently thumbing Daken’s tears away. “Warren never wanted to be an Apocalypse. It’s not you. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I’m not good enough,” Daken said, voice shrilling slightly with misery. “I’m never good enough.”

Bobby hesitated a moment and then pulled him into a hug; Daken didn’t react. “You’re good enough,” Bobby said softly, petting his back.

“Nobody wants me... Nobody ever wanted me... It was all a lie and I was too stupid to--” Daken’s breath hitched and he made a sound halfway between a hiccup and a gag.

“Hey, no, that’s not true. You’ve got people who--”

“They’re all lying!” Daken shouted. Bobby flinched and for a moment considered letting go or icing up again, then rejected both ideas and kept holding on. “They lie with their mouths and their bodies and they think they mean it but they don’t!” Daken babbled hysterically, his shaking getting more pronounced. “They can’t! Every interaction is tainted!”

“I know it hurts. It hurts so much, but--”

“I’m a failure. Everything I do is wrong.” Daken’s arms suddenly came up and wrapped around Bobby, just now noticing or caring that he was being hugged and returning it, clinging fiercely. “Everything I am is wrong. Why did he make me this way if he didn’t want me to be like this? Why was I never good enough? Why am I never good enough?”

“Daken, you are so smart and strong and- and competent and pretty,” Bobby said and then bit his tongue. Idiot. ‘Pretty’? That was so not this conversation and so not helpful. At least he hadn’t said ‘sexy’.

Daken stopped ranting and went quiet. His trembling tapered off, but he kept clinging for a few minutes before leaning away slightly. Bobby was about to let him go when Daken came back in at
Bobby started to open his mouth then caught himself and stopped, pulling back a few inches. “Daken, Daken, stop,” he whispered.

Daken stiffened and looked at him sharply, eyes wide and quickly filling with anger. Bobby saw the muscle in his jaw puff outward slightly as Daken clenched his teeth. Then he shoved Bobby away hard. “Because I’m not good enough for you either!” he snapped furiously.

“Daken, that’s not-- No. It’s-- I’m trying to be good enough!” Bobby protested. “You’re upset. You’re freaked out. You were all messed up a few minutes ago. I’m not going to take advantage of you.”

Daken stared at him for a few seconds, biting his lip, then lunged forward and grabbed the front of Bobby’s shirt. “Yes. I’m upset. So make me feel better,” Daken demanded. “Fuck me.”

Bobby wrapped his arms around Daken again, pulling him in, and pressed a soft kiss to his jaw, just in front of his ear, before whispering, “No. Not when I’m not sure if that’s going to make it worse.” Bobby closed his eyes and swallowed. “… I’m not a psychologist, I don’t know everything that’s going on here, but this feels messed up.”

Daken refused to be huggable, staying rigid with tension. “… If I’m just some repulsive charity-case to you, you can go to hell,” he growled. “I’ll go find someone who does want to fuck me.”

Bobby felt a wave of nausea at that. Don’t get upset. Don’t snap. “You’re not repulsive,” Bobby said, keeping his voice soft but certain. “You’re beautiful. You might be the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen... And I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to help you hurt yourself.”

Daken scoffed. “The ego on you. Maybe I like hurting myself.” He shifted his arms and then there was a sound that Bobby’s brain couldn’t quite process. Until he felt something hot and damp soaking his shirt.

Bobby grabbed Daken’s shoulders and pushed him back, holding their bodies apart as he stared down and the nausea rose again. Daken had laid both his arms open from elbow to wrist. The bleeding was already stopping. The slices looked like they’d gone deep but were already sealing themselves up. “… Jesus Christ, Daken!” Bobby gasped in horror.

Bobby moved again, starting to cross his arms as if going for a self-hug, but then his inner-wrist claws came out part way, just a few inches, and he hooked each into the opposite arm. “Daken, stop!” Bobby dropped his hands to Daken’s arms, grabbing just above each elbow and trying to keep him from raking through himself again. “Please, please don’t! Please. Stop. Daken, please,” he begged.

“I don’t want to feel like this!” Daken screamed, and he was trembling again. “I want to feel anything that isn’t this!”

“Please. Please,” Bobby kept pleading until he saw Daken’s claws retract. He didn’t so much relax as slump, and Bobby pulled him back in quickly, wrapping Daken up in his arms and holding tight. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Just- Just please don’t,” he whispered.

“… What do you want from me?” Daken whimpered softly.

Bobby took a few deep, shaky breaths, mind racing. Would honest-babbling be the best avenue at this point? “… I’m in love with you. But I’m scared of screwing it up. I’m scared because of how
much you’ve been hurt and that I can’t always tell when you are trying to hurt yourself, so I can’t
tell if what you’re asking me for is going to hurt you,” he whispered, tangling his fingers in the hair
at the back of Daken’s neck and leaning a cheek against his ear. “I’m scared that I’m too stupid and
insensitive and short-tempered, and I’ll end up just writing my name on the list of people who’ve
abused you. I’ve already hurt you.”

“I’m hurting right now. I want you to make it better,” Daken said in a low voice with an edge of a
growl to it. “Fuck me.”

“No, that’s not-- No,” Bobby protested helplessly, frustrated, overwhelmed by all of the last
however long it had been. “Daken, I want to do this right. I want to be good for you. I want this to
be a real relationship, not--”

“Then fuck me again tomorrow,” Daken cut him off, laying a hand on one side of Bobby’s neck
and kissing the other. “And the next day. And over and over and over.” He kissed again and
nuzzled just below Bobby’s ear. “I’ll scream and beg and moan for you.”

“W-Wait,” Bobby mumbled, struggling to remember his resolve and that what was happening right
now was not healthy or okay. Struggling to tell his body to calm down.

“Nooo,” Daken whined, not really drawing back, lips still tickling Bobby’s neck. “No no no I need
you please I need you please don’t go please don’t leave me please please!”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Bobby whispered and kissed Daken’s temple. He received a little sound
in reply that made him shiver, and he stroked Daken’s hair gently. “But I’m not having sex with
you right now,” he added, trying to sound firm (trying not to be firm). “That’s not the only thing
you have to offer, Daken.”

“Of course not. I’m also very good at killing,” Daken retorted.

“Will you please stop being mean to yourself and just let me hold you?” Bobby pleaded.

Daken was silent for several minutes, but his breath was noticeably agitated and uneven. Finally,
he nodded, nose brushing against Bobby’s neck.

Chapter End Notes

This sequence ended up being really long, so I decided to break it into two chapters
and I’ll post the other half tomorrow.

The thing about Bobby being able to dormant up a deathseed seems to be
simultaneously extrapolating from and completely at odds with the Astonishing X-
Men storyline, and maybe largely just used as a deus-ex-machina contrivance to
quickly put a bow on a plot arc and move on, but, uh, I guess it's canon now. So sure,
why not, it's no more contrived than any other deus-ex-machina around here.

As for the proximity issue, that I'm pulling from X-Force vol 3, during the 'now this is
a time-travel comic!!' plot arc. The team (this is Utopian-era, so Wolverine, Domino,
Warpath, X-23, Elixir, Archangel, Vanisher) gets sent to the far-future to check up on
Cable and Hope and try to help/retrieve. Before they get there, nobody has any reason
to know that Apocalypse is going to be alive (since at that point in time he's dead in the
main time/timeline) but they land and Warren immediately starts feeling his presence and hearing whispers in his head and getting kind of trancy-weird.
The deathseed was quiet again, but it felt like a cold, hard stone inside of his chest. Although Daken had grown accustomed to the lump of wrongness nestled next to his heart over the last few months, having it burning a hole in him again that evening had brought his attention fully back to its presence. But that presence was soothed somewhat by Drake’s, his arms wrapped loosely around Daken, fingers in his hair. His heart rate had slowed a while ago; he wasn’t fully asleep but he was dozing, and Daken let the steady beat be a sozu, giving measure to the quiet and guiding his mind away from mortal torments.

The smell of Daken’s blood lingered from where two soiled shirts were stuffed in a wastebasket, but the residue after they were discarded had been scrubbed with a washcloth, along with Daken’s makeup, leaving just a hint of soap overlaying the scent of Drake’s skin. And that scent was utterly perfect and pure from having not eaten a thing since being ice. Daken opened his mouth and tilted his chin forward just the tiniest bit, putting out his tongue to taste Drake’s collarbone for a brief moment. Drake didn’t stir and his pulse didn’t change, drowsy semi-consciousness not registering the sensation.

The spell of tranquility was broken suddenly by a rough knock on the main door. Drake drew a sharp breath, startling awake as the speaker in the front room called out. “Daken?” Logan’s voice.

Daken sighed and peeled himself away from Drake, sitting up with a yawn and calling to the security system, “Open.” He climbed to his feet and started making his way around the bed.

“W-Wait- Wha- D-D-Don’t--” Drake stammered, floundering to sit up as Daken heard the door open in the front room.

“Daken?” Logan called again.

“Yes. What,” Daken sighed, flipping on the light switch and rubbing his face as he paused in the door jam between the bedroom and front room.

“Heard there was an incident,” Logan said, looking back at him.

“Yes, that’s a word for it,” Daken agreed, turning and walking back into the bedroom to seek out a water bottle perched on a the nightstand. Drake was sliding into a panic; he seemed to be attempting, unsuccessfully, to make the bed look undisturbed and looked like he might be contemplating jumping out the window.

“You gonna tell me about it, or is this a ‘fuck off’?” Logan asked, coming over to lean against the door jam Daken had abandoned. “Hey, Bobby.”

“I’m sure Pryde has already told you about it, and I really don’t see the point in rehashing,” Daken
scoffed, taking a drink of water and then putting the bottle back.

“This- This is not what it looks like!” Drake exclaimed, flushed from his face down past his collarbone.

Logan gave him a blank expression. “I don’t know what it looks like, but it smells like Daken laid himself open and bled all over both your shirts,” he said, thumbing toward the wastebasket without bothering to look.

“I... Okay, that’s accurate,” Drake agreed, nodding. “And- And I would absolutely not take advantage of a personal crisis and... um...”

“Bobby. How many years have I known you?” Logan asked, raising an eyebrow.

“... Several?”

“So why the hell would I ever assume that?” Logan demanded. “And even if I didn’t know you, you think I couldn’t smell anything that had happened in here tonight?”

“Okay... Those are both good points...” Drake muttered and bit his lip for a moment.

Daken scoffed. “Oh, but he just wants to fully assure you that he’d never debase himself by fraternizing with the likes of--”

“Stop it!” Drake cut him off, glaring. “Do not put those words in my mouth. That’s not true, and I wasn’t trying to make your dad think that, and I don’t want you to think it, because it’s not true!”

Daken pursed his lips for a moment and cast his eyes down. “... He’s been keeping me from mutilating myself... A ‘suicide watch’ would be a bit over the top, but Drake seems to be adamant that I not spend the night cutting,” he said.

“Good on him,” Logan nodded.

“... I know a ‘Death’ episode leaves a hell of a hangover,” Drake said quietly, scratching the back of his neck. “But, uh, have you eaten?” he asked, glancing at Daken. “My dinner plans got a little scrubbed, and I’m kinda dying.”

Daken raised an eyebrow at him. “Are you asking to buy me dinner?”

“I’m asking if you want half a freezer-pizza,” Drake corrected. “It’s late and I’m not going to survive waiting to be seated and served at a restaurant.”

“Well, it’s not an idiot-pouch,” Daken noted, the corner of his lips turning up.

“I can’t even,” Drake sighed. “Do you want pizza or not?”

“Yes, please,” Daken murmured, lowering his eyes again.

“Okay, cool. I’ll be back in like...” Drake trailed off into a few seconds of silence. “Can I borrow a shirt?”

“I doubt anyone is going to be particularly put out at witnessing your abs,” Daken replied. “Isn’t walk-of-shame anxiety usually saved for the next morning?”

“Please?” Drake asked, starting to flush again.
“... Yes,” Daken relented, going to the dresser and pulling out a dusky rose t-shirt.

“Oh, okay. Pink shirt,” Drake said, accepting it and pulling it on.

“Is pink a problem for you?” Daken asked.

“No. I am past that point in my life,” Drake said firmly, shaking his head and smoothing his hands down his front. “Okay. I’ll be back in, like, fifteen minutes. With pizza. Back soon,” he babbled and then paused, looking awkward. “Bye.” He turned and hurried out of the suite.

Daken watched the door after it had closed for a few moments before turning and walking to his bathroom. He paused in the middle of it, numb and adrift. “How do you feel?” Logan’s voice asked from behind him, the door still wide open.

Daken was quiet and still for a while, then he knelt down next to the bathtub and turned on the tap. “Like I had my skin peeled off shortly before being dragged through hot coals. Followed by being told that I’d made a poor showing of it and wouldn’t be called back for a second audition.”

Logan was quiet for a few seconds. “Daken, you know that... feelin’ of loyalty wasn’t real,” he said.

“I know.”

“So it don’t matter that he didn’t want it,” Logan said.

“I know.”

“... You’re takin’ a bath?” he asked, digressing from the uncomfortable topic of feelings.

“Baths are relaxing,” Daken replied neutrally.

“Bobby’s bringin’ you a pizza in a few minutes. You gonna take the world’s shortest bath or eat in the tub?” Logan wondered skeptically.

“Are you forgetting who raised me? Or that the city in his name was so infamously known for having taken debaucherous dining decadence to the highest levels ever attained on a large scale?” Daken shrugged indifferently. “Pizza in the bath hardly makes the chart, when compared to combination banquet/orgies.” Even as he said it, Daken turned off the water and unplugged the drain, because Logan was right. He stayed where he was on the floor, leaning his arms against the rim of the tub.

“Everything in perspective, huh?” Logan sighed and crouched down near him but not touching. “... You’re quick to relate things back to him tonight.”

“You think he’s not always near the forefront of my mind?” Daken retorted. “You think just because I don’t say it--”

“Daken,” Logan interjected, his voice measured but not exactly ‘calm’ in any sense of tranquility. His scent was guilty and sad. “Say it now.”

“I don’t want to talk,” Daken whispered, not looking at him.

“... Okay,” Logan said softly. “You want Drake to just bring you the food and scram, or you want him back in here?”

“I want him to pound my ass like a jackhammer.”
“God--” Logan took a breath through his teeth. “Damn it, Kid, y’ain’t supposed to tell me shit like that.”

“Apparently he’s got moral hang-ups about ‘taking advantage’ of me when I’m low,” Daken sighed, resting his chin on one arm.

“Well he’s a good kid. It’d be nice if everybody worried about that kind of thing.” Logan said, standing up. “But seriously, you want him to stay with you?”

“... Yes,” Daken whispered. “I’ll probably do something stupid otherwise.”

“You want me to stay until he gets back?”

“No... I need a minute to compose.”

“Okay... I’m gonna go check on Bell then,” Logan said.

“... Tell her I’m sorry about our evening, and I’ll make it up to her,” Daken said.

“Sure,” Logan agreed and walked out.

Daken listened to his footsteps retreat and waited until the door had opened and closed. Then he shifted and held his arms out over the bathtub, unsheathing a claw. There wasn’t enough time for a bath, but he had a few minutes and he could make the most of them. The first stroke went from carpal to humeroulnar. The flow wasn’t as artful without the steam and wet skin, but the release and drip drip drip was still poison leaving his body. Daken heaved a relieved sigh and made another long slice. They ran dry and zipped themselves shut too quickly. He made slow diagonals, scraping across tendons, thinking about pressing down harder, but no, tendons were so annoying when they sprung themselves up his arm.

He was drawing a meandering course, back and forth, curving slowly down his arm, not symmetrically mirroring his tattoo but complimenting, when he heard a knock on his door and froze. Shit. How long had he been here? Shit. He was still paralyzed when he heard the door open, lock overridden by a senior staff member. Shit. “Daken?” Shit. He stared down at the bathtub below him. Blood painted down the side he was leaned against and fanned out over the bottom. Shit. Testimony that he’d been doing the exact thing Drake had asked him not to do. Shit. He could hear Drake setting something down in the front room and moving closer. Shit. “Daken?” Shit.

Feeling finally returned and Daken’s body started responding. He fumbled to turn on the faucet, to wash the evidence away. But he heard Drake’s foot land on the tile. “I’m sorry,” Daken whispered, not looking at him, putting his hand under the water and trying to splash it toward the wall of the tub beneath him.

“Oh God,” Drake breathed.

“I’m sorry,” Daken whispered again, silently cursing the blood for clinging and streaking.

Drake knelt down on the floor behind him and wrapped his arms around Daken, one loose around his shoulders, the other tighter around his waist. “Shhhhh,” he soothed. He was trembling. Or maybe Daken was. Or they both were.

“I’m sorry.”

“Shhh shhh. It’s okay. It’s okay,” Drake whispered, holding him tightly for a moment before releasing Daken. He stayed a warm presence against his back, as Drake reached out under the
stream and gently helped wash the blood off of Daken’s arms. “It’s okay.”

Daken bit his lip, breath shuddering as his lungs fought against air that felt too thick.

Drake tugged Daken to lean back against him. He ran his hands gently along Daken’s arms and over his wrists then squeezed his hands for a moment; the water turned to steam and whipped away in the wake of the touch. “Logan left you alone?” he asked softly.

“I asked him to,” Daken replied, pulling his arms against his chest as Drake let them go. “I’m sorry.”

“Shhhh. It’s okay.” Drake said and kissed the side of his head. He pressed one hand to the rim of the tub and Daken watched and listened to thick frost build up along the side and then flake itself down to the bottom, melting and mixing with the water from the faucet, erasing the color and fading the scent to a coppery undertone. “Come on,” he said softly, kissing the same spot again and turning the faucet off. “Pizza will get cold.”

Daken let himself be helped to his feet and tugged out to the main room. The pizza was waiting atop a cutting board on the coffee table with two coke bottles and a pile of paper napkins. Drake pulled him over to the couch, and once settled, put an arm around Daken’s waist, keeping him close and secure. He wasn’t reaching for the pizza. The hour had faded from ‘evening’ to ‘night’ some time ago, and he’d said he was hungry. But the emphasis there belonged on the ‘was’. “... I ruined your appetite,” Daken murmured.

“It’s okay,” Drake said again.

“I can fix it,” Daken whispered and nuzzled Drake’s neck as he dumped hunger pheromones.

“That’s...” Drake faltered, his pulse quickened and momentary confusion turned to discomfort. “Okay. Okay, cool. That’s good. That’s enough. Thanks,” he said, and then leaned forward and picked up a slice of pizza.

Daken sat back and watched him silently as Drake started eating. A minute went by, then Drake swallowed his most recent bite and turned to look at Daken.

“I did something wrong, didn’t I?” he asked quietly.

“... My powers make you uncomfortable,” Daken noted in a near-whisper. “Like you said. It’s a ‘despite’ at best.”

“No. No, that’s not-- I’m just--” Drake floundered, panicking. “I just don’t think you should exploit yourself just to make me hungry. That’s--”

“Like you ‘exploited’ yourself to clean up my mess in the bathroom?” Daken retorted, leaning away from him but not quite able to make himself break contact. “I have ‘bad’ powers. I’ve known that as long as I’ve known I had them at all.”

Drake put the rest of his slice down and then grabbed a napkin, wiping the grease from his hand. He reached for Daken’s shoulder; Daken considered pulling away but didn’t. “It wasn’t your powers,” Drake said softly, staring him in the eye. “It’s that the first thing you did was take blame for how I felt, and then you go straight from that into trying to- to...” He bit his lip and sucked a breath through his teeth. “Maybe you want to ‘serve my vision’ too?”

“Go to hell,” Daken hissed.
“It *scare* me,” Drake whispered. “Seeing how you got earlier… When the deathseed switched you to servant mode, you weren’t fighting it at all. It didn’t even occur to you, did it? Because it’s dug its roots into the shit Romulus did to you.” He reached out and touched Daken’s face. “I’ve seen you in big-bad-villain mode and murder-drenched-and-pissed mode… and what I saw tonight scared me more than anything I’ve seen you do… I’ve been clumsy with you and I don’t always pay enough attention to see when something’s off, and I’m terrified that you could start down that road with me and I won’t notice…”

Daken was still and quiet for a moment, then he moved, scooting himself closer, bridging his legs across Drake’s and pressing up against his side, resisting the urge to get the rest of the way into his lap. He nuzzled and kissed his neck. He heard Drake’s heart flutter and Daken pressed his tongue against his jugular to feel and taste it too for a moment. “I want you…” Daken whimpered. “I want you on me and in me and moving with me.”

“… I don’t think you’re in an ideal head-space to make that decision right now,” Drake replied, strain clear in his voice, arousal and frustration in his scent.

“Will you fuck me later?” Daken asked, and nipped gently at Drake’s neck. “When I’m not a hysterical mess, will you fuck me?”

“… Okay,” Drake breathed.

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

Daken relaxed into him, face cradled in the nook of Drake’s neck, as he curled both arms around him and held Daken tightly. He built up anti-aphrodesia pheromones to soothe away the frustrated tension, and waited, listening to Drake’s pulse slow and smelling his scent sweeten as he relaxed. Then Daken shifted back to eliciting hunger, but he didn’t lampshade it this time.

“… Hey,” Drake murmured, petting his shoulder. “Are you--”

“You’re hungry,” Daken sighed, pulling back and swinging his legs down to reposition himself in a less obtrusive configuration. “And I’m a bit too big to maneuver around.”

“That’s-- I mean, are--” Drake fumbled, radiating worry.

Daken leaned in to kiss his cheek. “I’m a meal behind too,” he reassured him.

“Okay.” Drake relaxed and then retrieved his pizza as Daken sought out a share for himself. A few minutes later, as Drake was picking out a second slice, he said, “I called Warren while the pizza was in the oven. He’s super embarrassed and asked if you were okay… I told him you were bouncing back… That you’re really strong.”

“So you lied,” Daken noted.

“Not about the strong part,” Drake replied softly. A period of quiet passed, then after his second slice Drake paused and ventured a hesitant semi-query. “That night at the Meantime, before I went preemptive-strike on you, you were just trying to slow me down or something, weren’t you?”

Daken stared at nothing while he chewed, and then for a moment longer after he swallowed. “… Why would I?” he murmured. “Zach was oblivious. I couldn’t move him while I was busy with you… If I wanted to waylay you, I would have slipped somebody a hundred to do it *for* me.”
“Then… why?” Drake asked, looking at him with a pinched brow.

Daken sighed and shrugged one shoulder. “I recognized you from pictures. I knew who you were. I knew about your brush with a deathseed,” he said quietly. “And that was rather on my mind at the time… I’d limped along for a while, but it got louder and hurt more the longer it was there. It’d reached a point I couldn’t compartmentalize it anymore. The decision to bring Zach into it was desperation, I’d avoided intentionally inflicting myself on children for decades, although intention not always being met with success… But when he led you to me, some idiotic, superstitious reflex in me decided it was providence.” He grimaced a little, glancing away. “And when I approached and smelled you... It was all a bit enchanting.”

“I really thought you were making fun of me,” Drake said in a pained, guilty voice. “... I can’t hear the difference when you’re teasing or insulting.”

“... Maybe I don’t know the difference between the two,” Daken admitted softly, then finished his slice as quiet stretched out again.

This time it was interrupted by a frantic-tempoed knock. “Daken?” Zach’s voice called.

Daken’s chest squeezed and anxiety surged up his throat like bile. He swallowed hard, putting down his slice of pizza and called mock-calmly to the speaker as he wiped his hands on a napkin and stood up. “Open.”

The door burst open and Zach came rushing in. “Everybody’s saying you--” he started and then froze, going momentarily silent as his eyes landed on Drake. “What are you doing here?” he growled, eyes narrowing into a vicious glare.

“Baby-sitting,” Daken answered for him, walking a few steps to put himself in front of Zach, cutting off his view of Drake. “I had a lapse, but I’m okay now.”

Zach looked up at him, brow pinched. “... Then why do you need a baby-sitter?” he asked quietly.

“It’s complicated,” Daken replied flatly. “I’m fine.”

Zach frowned for another moment, swallowed visible, then leaned to the side and pointed a finger at Drake. “Then you should go,” he asserted.

“I-- What--” Drake sputtered in offended discomposure. “That is really not your call, Zach!”

“You were there!” Zach accused. “A bunch of people saw you!”

“You, stop it,” Daken admonished.

“You did something to him!” Zach continued, undeterred.

“Zach.”

“It was your fault!”

“SHUT UP!” Daken screamed, lifting his hands to his head, fingers curled in primitive reflex as his eyes squeezed shut. His knees hit the floor and he hunched over. “SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP!” He heard Zach stumble back several steps, heard him gasp, heard his pulse jump. A moment later, he smelled hurt. Fear. Daken’s stomach turned. He was scaring his child. He was a terrible parent. His fingernails dug in above and around his temples. “I’m sorry…” he whined, breath hitching, as nails dragged downward, tearing his skin. “I’m sorry…”
Hands wrapped around his wrists, grip firm and insistent but not painful, pulling his nails away from flesh. “...Zach, Daken lied. He’s not fine,” Drake said quietly. “What happened earlier was a flair-up in his deathseed. It’s dormant again now, but there are after-effects. It’s going to take Daken a little while to get steady.”

“W-Wh-- Then- Then I’ll watch him!” Zach decided, voice shrill and upset.

“No,” Drake said in a hard shutdown.

“You can’t tell me what to--”

“Zach, stop it,” Drake snapped. “The last thing Daken needs right now is bitching.”

“What makes you such an expert?!” Zach demanded.

“I’ve had a deathseed,” Drake shot back, and Zach quieted, startled. “I’m the only one on the current staff who’s had more than a little brush with one.” He let go of Daken’s wrists and wrapped an arm around him. “Look, we’re not having a debate right now, because I don’t care what your argument is: it’s wrong. You don’t know what you’re talking about, and you don’t know how to navigate this. Which you’re proving every time you talk back. Calm. down. Daken’s not in a place to handle agitation right now.”

Zach drew a few congested, shaking breaths, and then whispered, “I hate you.”

Daken’s blood ran cold and his heart was lead.

“He means me,” Drake gasped quickly, pulling him tight against his side as Daken lifted his head to look up at Zach. His eyes were wide, his brow was pinched, is mouth slightly open in a dismayed shape. “It’s okay. It’s okay. He meant me,” he said softly, one hand tight on Daken’s waist, the other squeezing his shoulder. “You know he meant me.” Then his voice got harsh, an angry edge to it. “Tell him you meant me.”

“I... I meant Mister Drake,” Zach mumbled.

Daken drew a shuddering breath, and then quickly clapped a hand over his mouth to hold in a sob. He was suddenly shaking violently.

“Zach, tell Daken you love him. Then go to your room and calm the fuck down,” Drake ordered in a quiet but hard voice.

Zach moved, slowly, stiffly. He knelt down and leaned his forehead against Daken’s. “...I love you,” he whined softly. “...I’m sorry.”

Daken reached up and wrapped an arm behind his shoulders, clinging for a minute as Zach sniffled. He couldn’t make himself stop trembling. He kissed Zach’s temple and then let go, pulling his arm back in close to him. “...I’ll be fine,” Daken whispered. “...I’ll talk to you about it tomorrow.”

“...Okay,” Zach agreed without anymore argument, and climbed back to his feet. He took a step backward and stammered, “G- Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Daken whispered, lowering his head and listening to Zach retreat, open the door, and leave. The next breath he drew was painful, and this time Daken couldn’t reign in the sob.

Drake shifted, twisted around so he could pull Daken against his chest, wrapping arms tight around
him. “It’s okay… It’s gonna be okay,” he murmured, as Daken lost a few more sobs into his shoulder. “... What can I do? What do you need?” he asked, lips brushing the skin above Daken’s ear. “Do you want some music or anything?”

Daken took a deep, quavering breath, and pulled away. Drake let him escape, watching as Daken crawled back to the couch, waiting a moment before getting up and following and settling back down on the other side.

“Are you…?” he started softly as Daken picked up his Kindle off the side cabinet and started looking through the library.

Daken’s eyes skimmed over titles, rejecting them all out of hand, before switching collections and picking something classic and sweet. He opened it and held the Kindle out to Drake. “Read to me.”

“Okay,” Drake agreed, accepting the Kindle as Daken flopped himself down sideways and put his head in Drake’s lap. “Oh, okay. Lemme scooch into the corner so your legs can get some room,” he muttered, scooting across the cushion until he was up against the arm of the couch. Daken squirmed to follow and put his head on Drake’s thigh again, settling in as he turned his attention to the Kindle. “‘Poems Lyrical and Narrative Being the First Volume of the Collected Works in Verse and Prose of William Butler Yeats Imprinted at the Shakespeare Head Press Stratford-on-Avon.’ Wow, that is a hell of a title. I feel like some of those words should have maybe been in a smaller font than others,” he noted, dropping the arm which wasn’t occupied by holding up the Kindle loosely over Daken’s chest and curling that hand gently against the side of his face. “Poetry, huh? I don’t think I can make any promises about the quality of my reading, but I’ll give it a try.”

Chapter End Notes

Ungh, is that three chapters in a row with the 'self-harm' warning? The next one will be cheerful, I promise.

Bobby isn't normally even a little concerned about being seen shirtless, like half of his uniforms have basically been just taking off his shirt. He's more self-conscious right now about being seen walking out of Daken's room semi-undressed, particularly because at this point everybody who didn't witness Daken's massive, public breakdown has at least heard about it through the gossip mill, so similar to being worried about Logan's perception of shirtless-cuddle-times, he's worried about looking like a fuckin' creep.
Bobby woke, bleary and disoriented for a moment before picking out what had dragged him into consciousness. Whimpered babble, unintelligible. Bobby rolled over and pushed himself up on his elbows, trying to gather a sense of the space around him in the darkness. Daken had huddled himself on the very edge of the bed, practically falling off, and he was shaking so hard Bobby could feel tremors through the mattress. “Daken,” he called softly. The whimpers and trembles continued unacknowledging. “Daken, it’s okay. Wake up,” he whispered, reaching out and gently petting his shoulder.

He felt Daken start the moment he was touched, and the whimpers stopped, replaced by short, agitated pants. Daken sat up, struggling slightly with the eiderdown, his movements awkward and sharp, and then went still there for a minute. His breath got gradually quieter, but he was still trembling and radiating tension.

“Daken?” Bobby called again. Inky shadows shifted and sequined eyes turned toward him. Bobby’s breath caught for a second, startled and fascinated. Daken twisted around, crawling over and settling back down against him, tucking his nose down behind Bobby’s ear. “You’ve got a cat’s eye-glow,” Bobby noted quietly as he got his arms repositioned and laced his fingers with the hand that had landed on his chest.

“It’s refraction, not luminescence,” Daken sighed against his neck.

“... Do you want to talk about it?” Bobby whispered.

“Like a bicycle reflector.”

“I mean your nightmare,” he clarified.

“I don’t remember,” Daken murmured.

“Okay,” Bobby gave himself permission to take that at face value, because pestering would be unhelpful. “Do you need anything?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

Daken reflexively took a deep breath as he woke. Then he took another intentionally, luxuriating in the scent. He spent a few minutes not moving, not opening his eyes, just breathing. Finally, slowly and carefully, he shifted, pulling away from Drake and getting an arm under him, pushing himself up a little and looking down at the man sleeping soundly in his bed. It would be at least an hour, probably more, before he woke naturally. Daken assumed the times Drake had caught him before the morning warm-up he must have set an alarm and done so deliberately.

He leaned down and placed a very delicate kiss against Drake’s lips. His chest kept rising and falling at the same languid rate, and his eyelids didn’t flutter. Daken pulled back after a few slow breaths and slid out of the bed without shifting it, tucking the duvet in close to compensate the
temperature-shift of his absence. He paused for a moment, watching and listening to Drake’s breathing to satisfy himself that he would stay asleep, then walked silently out of the room and quietly shut himself in the bathroom.

Daken sighed deeply and closed his eyes, running his hands back over his hair, holding them there for a minute. Then he grimaced and peeled off the undershirt he’d worn to bed for the sake of Drake’s delicate sensibilities. Pajamas. Daken tossed the shirt on the floor and followed it soon after with his drawers. There was something intensely unsavory about sleeping clothed; maybe only that it reminded him of outdoor sleeping, and by extension, much of his late childhood and youth. He braced his palms against the counter, leaning against locked arms, and closed his eyes, taking a few deep breaths and a mental inventory of self.

The previous night’s hysteria had faded, but there was still a rawness within him and a longing need. Sexual? Slantways, yes. He wanted comfort and lavish affection. Sweetness. The earnest variety he’d heard fairy tales about. The kind of closeness that kept being dangled just out of his reach. Drake might have it to give. He didn’t live blindfolded like Johnny. The word ‘love’ wasn’t a lie on his lips like Donna. Of course, Drake having the capacity didn’t guarantee that Daken would be the recipient.

If his interest was infatuation bred with pity, that could prove ephemeral. Maybe Drake’s heroic complex was ultimately at fault, registering him as a damsel in distress, but damned if Daken couldn’t keep a man’s interest. He opened his eyes and knelt down, pulling out the cabinet doors and reaching under the sink. He deposited a bottle of castile on the counter above him and dug a bulb-syringe out of its box.

Bobby woke up alone, and for a minute or two nothing was odd about that, because he woke up alone every day. But then he realized that he shouldn’t be alone, that he hadn’t been alone when he closed his eyes. Part of him started to panic, another part of him told that part to shut up. It wasn’t as if Daken had walk-of-shamed out of here, this was his room. He was coming back. Obviously. So Bobby lay on his back and stared up at the dark ceiling for a while, trying to suppress irrational anxieties. After ten minutes or so, he rolled out of the bed and wandered through the dark, silent micro-apartment to use Daken’s bathroom. Then he went back to bed, pulled the eiderdown over his lap, and sat with his knees pulled up, arms and chin resting on them.

After an epoch or two, the main door opened and Bobby let out a breath, feeling simultaneously relieved and more anxious. He didn’t hear the footsteps, but a moment later, Daken came around the frame of the open bedroom door. “Hey--” Bobby started, and then went quiet as Daken leaned down and wordlessly kissed him. He was sweaty, dressed in his running gear. Of course. Bobby’s heart was pounding within seconds; Daken’s sweat, too fresh to have staled and soured, had a tantalizingly heady smell.

Daken pulled back just as it was occurring to Bobby that he should grab and drag him down into the bed. He was out of reach before Bobby’s overtaxed brain had completed that thought. Bobby wasn’t sure if he said something, or if Daken said something, or if nothing had been said at all. Daken disappeared, retreating to his apparently mandatory morning shower. Bobby wished he hadn’t. He wanted to taste Daken’s sweat and feel his fingers slide against slippery skin. He wanted to turn on the lamp and stare at him, glistening, beautiful and spread.

The daze started to clear enough for Bobby to realize he was in a daze. He shifted to ice-form, counted out thirty seconds, and shifted back, shaking his head. He rubbed his hands over his face and took a deep breath, then realized he smelled coffee and glanced at the nightstand next to him.
Bobby turned on the lamp and confirmed that there was a sixteen-ounce paper cup sitting beneath it, gently steaming. The corner of his lips twitched up and he shifted, settling his legs down, and picked up the offering. He found that it was exactly the way he always ordered it, when he splurged on cafe coffee, with exactly the right amount of sugar. Had Daken observed how he took it by scent?

Bobby sat in the lamplight, sipping his latte and waiting with a patience that was comfortable now, as he listened zenly to the shower. The water eventually turned off, and a couple minutes passed in silence, drying off, the sound of the bathroom door opening was so soft Bobby could have missed it if he hadn’t been listening, then silence because Daken had ninja feet. He came back through the open doorway and Bobby almost dropped what was left of the latte in his own lap. The towel had apparently stayed in the bathroom. And obviously clean clothes were in this room. Bobby had been in between sips of coffee and didn’t have anything in his mouth to choke on, but he still managed to choke.

Michelangelo could not have done justice to Daken’s body.

And that perfect body was climbing into Bobby’s lap now. “Good morning,” Daken whispered, and kissed him.

Bobby clumsily waved his coffee in the vicinity of the nightstand, taking four tries before he managed to set it down, and then he reached up, tangling his fingers in Daken’s damp hair for a moment, then sliding them slowly down the sides of his neck, fanned out over his shoulders, and down his chest. The kiss went on, simultaneously serene and desperate, as Bobby circled his arms around Daken, a possessive urge to pull him in crushingly fighting a desire to carefully explore every dip and swell of him with butterfly softness. He felt Daken hook a couple fingers around his thumb to pull that hand away slightly and press something into his palm. The small part of Bobby’s mind that wasn’t fully absorbed in marveling over how gorgeous Daken was puzzled over the thing in his hand. A soft-plastic tube. His brain didn’t have the RAM to complete this process.

Daken broke the kiss, but his mouth didn’t really move away from Bobby’s as he murmured, “I’m nice and clean outside and inside.” He tilted his head, pressing another short kiss, barely more than a peck, to punctuate the sentence. “No classes or obligations. Perfect time to make this a real thing.”

Bobby’s slow-crunching brain finally informed him that he was holding a tube of KY, and started working on trying to process what Daken said. He ran the words through his mind twice, and the second time, the last statement caught. Traffic lights. Flags. Something red. Bobby dropped the tube and brought up both hands, gently catching and cradling Daken’s face. “Daken, it’s already real,” he whispered, putting just enough space between them to look into his eyes. “It’s real because we say it’s real. Because we feel it’s real inside us.”

“I want to feel you inside me,” Daken breathed sensuously.

Bobby shivered. “D-Daken, this isn’t--”

Daken’s expression changed abruptly; sultriness dropped away as hurt flashed across his face and then rolled over into anger. “You promised!” he accused.

“Wh--”

“That you’d fuck me!” Daken insisted, voice a few notes too shrill with stress; the anger in his eyes was overcast with fear now.
“Daken, shhh, shhh, it’s okay.” Bobby wrapped an arm behind his shoulders and tried to pull him back in close.

“It’s not okay!” Daken snapped, resisting. “You said--”

“Daken you are freaking out right now!” Bobby protested. “Last night’s bullshit still has you wound up, and part of you knows that.”

Daken made an anguished, wordless whine in the back of his throat and squeezed his eyes shut, starting to tremble.

“Daken, lay down, okay?” Bobby cajoled, lifting Daken’s chin and giving him a soft kiss. “Boyfriend. Lover. Paramour. Plus one. Come lay down.” Either the quick kisses he punctuated with or the possessive language seemed to calm Daken down a little and he relented, crawling off of Bobby’s lap and onto the bed next to him. Bobby scooted around a bit and laid down, pulling the eiderdown up over them and wrapping his arms around Daken. “It’s gonna be okay,” he whispered, putting his forehead together with Daken’s.

Daken made another whine that morphed into a growl, his eyes squeezed shut. He swallowed and sniffed. “... Perfect waste of an enema,” he muttered.

“Would be a great name for a punk band,” Bobby offered, and cupped a hand against Daken’s head, gently stroking the thumb against the skin by his mohawk. “... It’s gonna be okay.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I believe it,” Bobby said and picked his head up off the pillow a little, shifting forward to give him a little kiss before settling back. “... Do you want to talk? Or read? Or just cuddle?”

“... I don’t know,” Daken whined.

“That’s okay,” Bobby assured him. “You can think about it. Or not think about it. Just breath... It’s gonna be okay.”

“... When will you fuck me?” Daken whimpered.

“... If I schedule it on the calendar or something, and then it’s not a good time when that rolls around, maybe you’ll get panicked and yell at me again,” Bobby sighed. “Daken… You’re getting all upset because you think it’s not ‘real’ without sex, like you think it’s gonna fall apart or something if you don’t get in there and glue it up fast, but that’s not how it works.” He lifted his head and leaned over to kiss him again before continuing. “How many times did you have sex when it wasn’t a ‘real’ relationship.”

“Every time,” Daken whispered.

“So slow down. Chill out. Stop trying to use it as a shortcut or contract or something,” Bobby murmured gently. “It’s supposed to feel good, right? So getting stressed and trying to make it happen has got to be pretty counterproductive.”

Daken heaved a whine-sigh.

“Hey,” Bobby murmured. “You are sooooooo beautiful, and it is not for any lack of jaw-dropping sexiness that I am saying ‘no’ for right now… The deathseed-hangover’s putting a whole lot of fear and insecurity in your head. I’m not going to abandon you though, and you can tell that I’m not lying, right? You can hear it and smell it, right?”
“... I can only tell that you believe it.”

“I believe it a lot. I trust it. I have faith in it,” Bobby whispered. “Can you have a little bit in me? I know it’s hard. I know the deathseed is making it harder. But just try, that’s all I’m asking.”

Daken squirmed and cuddled in closer.

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A hunger-headache was starting to get roots into Daken when he and Drake were about halfway between the school and their destination. He reflected that he should have drank a Boost before he left his suite. As they stepped back onto sidewalk after a crossing, he felt a hand light on his shoulder. “You look kinda pale,” Drake said.

“I’m hungry, and I haven’t had much sunlight yet today,” Daken replied with a note of involuntary petulance bleeding through.

“You haven’t…?” Drake started, confusion in his voice. “... Daken. Daken. Does your tan disappear overnight?” he asked.

“Healing factor.”

“That is some weirdly delightful trivia,” Drake said, sounding amused. “How long does it take you to get it back? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you not tan.”

“The mornings you’ve caught me on the stairs I probably wouldn’t have, but I suppose the ceiling lights weren’t on yet then. The sun’s still in the trees during my run, so I usually pick it up during the warm-up session with the students.” Daken shrugged, then gestured as they reached the restaurant. “This one.”

They stepped inside and Drake faltered as he looked around. “Am I dressed for this place?”

“It’s not dinner,” Daken said and then addressed the hostess, “Room for two?”

“You’re in luck,” she replied with a smile, grabbing a pair of menus. “Right over here.”

She deposited them next to a window, and Drake kept looking at the decor and patrons instead of his menu. “You could have told me it wasn’t a tshirt place,” he muttered.

“I’m wearing a tshirt. It’s summer, it’s Saturday, it’s not even noon,” Daken sighed, picking up the smaller menu the hostess had put on the edge of the table between them.

“Are you seriously going to order wine in the morning?” Drake asked.

“Who was it who showed up sloppy-drunk at my door last week?” Daken replied, raising an eyebrow at him. Drake flushed, cringing. “It’s a tea menu.”

“A tea menu? Who has a tea menu?” Drake looked incredulous, leaning across the table to be sure Daken wasn’t making it up to tease him.

“Do you have a favorite?” Daken asked, turning the menu toward him.

“Uhh… The only tea-names I know are Lipton, Stash and Celestial Seasonings,” Drake said.

“Do you want me to order tea for you?” Daken smirked.
“Yes please.”

“Bitter, spicy, delicate?”

“... Hot?” Drake shrugged at him. “I’m just gonna leave it to your discretion.”

After the waitress had come and gone with their orders, Drake had relaxed somewhat and was back to glancing around but without the nervous self-consciousness. “I think there is a higher than standard demo percentage of really well-groomed men sharing tables here,” he noted after a while.

“Drake, it’s brunch. Of course there are,” Daken huffed in amusement.

“I feel like that’s over-simplified logic,” Drake retorted. “If it were brunch at just, like, IHOP, I’d probably expect to see a lot of semi-hungover college kids. This is fancy brunch.”

“Two-incomes-no-kids fancy?” Daken suggested.

“That kind of fancy,” Drake agreed, and then frowned slightly for a moment before saying, “I have a condition.”

Daken raised an eyebrow at him.

“You’ve got to start calling me ‘Bobby’,” he said. “The last-name-basis thing is weird now.”

Daken looked blankly back at him for a moment, then leaned forward and reached across the table, catching that face and holding it still, staring deep into doe-brown eyes. They stared at each other in silence for a few minutes.

“... I don’t know what’s happening right now.”

“I’m trying to change what your name is in my head,” Daken replied quietly.

“Oh. Okay... That wasn’t actually supposed to be a huge pressure kind of thing,” he said, looking uncomfortable again. “You’re getting pretty intense on me here.”

“Bobby...” Daken said softly, moving his right hand to stroke it slowly down Bobby’s cheek. “Never ‘Robert’?”

“Only on legal documents,” he agreed, catching one of Daken’s hands as he’d started to pull them back to his side of the table. Bobby wrapped it in both of his own for a moment, kissing Daken’s knuckles.

They were interrupted by the waitress returning with their tea. Bobby let go of Daken’s hand, setting back into his seat with the slightest hint of self-consciousness flashing across his features, and giving her room to set down the pot and two bone-china cups. She asked if anything else was needed, and Daken sent her off with a polite thank you, before pouring for Bobby and then himself.

Bobby took a sip and seemed to consider it carefully. “I don’t think you’re going to convert me away from coffee, but this is giving me some idea of what the big deal is with tea,” he noted, looking down at the contents of his cup. “This is black?”

“Blended back and green, representing the journey of the Bodhisattva who founded Zen,” Daken replied.

Bobby frowned slightly. “Is this religious tea? Is it okay to drink for just brunch?”
“It’s not religious tea, it’s artistic tea inspired by a religion,” Daken corrected. “It’s fine to drink for brunch, just don’t sugar it.”

“Okay,” Bobby agreed, and took another sip, then asked curiously, “Is this where you bring Gabby for princess-day?”

“This isn’t a tea house.”

“They’ve got a tea menu and artistic teas,” Bobby protested.

“Gabby’s in it for the miniature sandwiches and tartlets,” Daken replied.

Bobby chuckled. “So do you dress up as a princess too?” he asked.

“Do you want to come to the next princess day?” Daken asked, raising an eyebrow and smirking.

“I’m not sure I could pull off the dress,” Bobby said, wrinkling his nose.

Daken chuckled. “I’m sure Gabby would be pleased to have a prince along.”

“How about a scoundrel with a heart of gold? The best princess movies have those,” Bobby suggested.

“Oh, are we inviting Gambit?” Daken asked, raising an eyebrow. “You’re not a scoundrel.”

“Well, then, my ambitions have been dashed,” Bobby sighed. “Princes don’t even get to have their own names.”

“Florian, Henry, Philip, Eric, Adam, Edward, Naveen,” Daken listed off in a bored tone.

Bobby gave him a look somewhere between bafflement and morbid fascination. “Why do you know this?” he asked.

“To win an argument with Gabby.” Daken shrugged.

Bobby snorted and rolled his eyes as the waitress returned, setting their orders in front of them with the expected cheerful, empty back and forth, before disappearing again. Bobby was left staring at his plate with doubtful confusion. “Daken,” he called, looking up with a frown. “Daken, they put sushi on my schmear.”

“Sushi involves rice very specifically,” Daken corrected, rolling his eyes. “They put salmon roe on your salmon.”

“So then I should have asked for my eggs on the side?” Bobby asked, leaning down to examine a decadent sandwich, the top half, slathered thickly in cream cheese, set next to the garnish so the mountain of lox could be appreciated for its aesthetic perfection before consumption. “If I’d known I was ordering eggs, I mean.”

“Oh scrape it off, you baby,” Daken scoffed, rolling his eyes, hunger-headache eroding his patience.

“No no, I’m going to try this weird-schmear,” Bobby decided, affecting an air of bravery as he picked up the upper crust and set it down on top, hiding the roe beneath. “I already knew this was going to be a hoity-toity hipster-wich since they were using croissants instead of bagels.”

“So I’m hearing that you would have preferred IHOP and the hungover frat boys?”
“We’ll find out,” Bobby said, picking up the sandwich and taking a bite. As he chewed thoughtfully, his face twitched twice in momentary startled looks. He swallowed and leaned toward Daken, stage-whispering in conspiratorial shock. “They explode when they get bit.”

“So do grapes,” Daken sighed, cutting annoyedly at his tomato feta frittata. “Order something else if you want, but I’m not waiting.”

“No, this is stupidly delicious,” Bobby replied. “I think there might be, like, flavors in this cream cheese, but I have no idea what they are. It feels super weird though.”

“Mm, maybe dim sum would be safer next time,” Daken mused.

“Because fried chicken feet and tiny octopuses disguised as mushrooms are the most normal ever,” Bobby said with a chuckle and took another bite of his sandwich.

“That’s the point. You enter without the expectation of your usual breakfast status quo, leaving yourself more open to surprises,” Daken pointed out.

Bobby tilted his head, seeming to consider the logic as he chewed. “That’s a strategy,” he nebulously agreed after swallowing. “I haven’t done the fish eggs before even when I got sushi, so I don’t think it’s just a context thing. They didn’t look like food. They look like… beads.”

“So it’s bedazzled food.” Daken shrugged.

“Oh my God… Food-Bedazzler. Why is that not a thing?” Bobby demanded. “Home Shopping Network, you have failed me.”


“I want to Bedazzle everything I eat,” Bobby declared.

“Edible rhinestones would almost certainly be more or less pure sugar,” Daken noted. “You’d have diabetes before the year was out.”

“Worth it.”

On the way back from the restaurant crowds on the sidewalk were thinner, and Bobby took the opportunity to get hold of Daken’s hand as they walked. The gesture went unremarked upon, but Daken made no attempt to extricate his hand. After a block, as they paused to wait for a crosswalk, Daken turned to him and asked, “You’re a video gamer?”

“Casually, I guess. I play to decompress,” Bobby said with a shrug. “I don’t try to be competitive with anything, since I don’t have the time. And I’m not sure I could really take it that seriously if I got to overthinking, given the whole struggle-to-survive and superheroing and stuff... Do you… like video games?” he asked, not quite able to believe that but not seeing any other reason for the inquiry.

Daken gave a dismissive wave with his free hand and wrinkled his nose a little. “It’s just another story-telling medium, that anybody gets obsessed or upset over the substrate is stupid. Quality of any given piece, and its adherence to or subversion of social values, depends upon the artists,” he said as the light changed and they started across the street. “Although, that being said, audience-participation automatically increases audience-engagement, so that the illusion of decision-making
can be used as a crutch to prop up a weak story and sloppy art, making the media perhaps too forgiving and encouraging laziness in its artists.”

“Soo you like critiquing video games then?” Bobby amended, bemused.

“Zach likes them,” Daken said.

“Oh.”

“A lowkey semi-distraction would make attempts at reconciliatory getting-to-know-you time easier,” Daken explained. “A movie would fail to provide interaction, traditional games, or picnics or whatever the usual cliches, would be too much of it.”

“Right…” Bobby agreed unenthusiastically. If getting Daken to warm up to him had seemed nigh impossible, winning Zach over would probably take an act of God.

“I could ply him with a takeout dinner and maybe you two play some one of those cartoonish, good humor type of fare?” Daken suggested. “Like the Smash Brothers ones?”

Bobby hummed thoughtfully, considering for a moment. “Will you be playing?” he asked.

“I’ll… be present,” Daken replied, and it looked like he was muting a grimace. “For moral support, diffuse tension, et cetera.”

“So that sounds like a ‘no’ to the liking video games,” Bobby noted.

“I prefer reading.”

“Okay, so the Mario battle royal kind of games aren’t really any good with just two players. That genre got itself off the ground with four and four remains the ideal if you ask me,” Bobby said, thinking it over. “For two players, I think the best casual-gaming games are the classic arcade-style tournaments. The new Mortal Kombat might be able to hold a teenager’s interest for a few minutes.”

Daken nodded. “Is that something you already have or should I buy it?”

“I’ve got it, don’t buy anything,” Bobby assured him. “So, is this a thing you want to do today…?”

Daken sighed, looking suddenly tired. “I want to get it over with because I don’t like it hanging over everything… but putting it off a day, to give me time to talk to him alone, would probably be more judicious,” he noted.

“I guess so, yeah,” Bobby agreed, melancholically realizing that they were almost back to campus, and as soon as they got there Daken would probably abandon him to go reassure Zach and Bellona and be booked for the rest of the day. “Do you want to have dinner tonight? Together?” he asked.

Daken glanced at him, seeming to consider as he wet his lips. “... If Worthington is still in town, maybe you should try that dinner over again instead,” he suggested, and turned his eyes forward again. “But meet him somewhere this time.”

“Okay,” Bobby agreed.
Duvet/Eiderdown: Duvet is the French name, eiderdown is an English term for the same thing (maybe old-fashioned now?). I think I'd already referred to Daken's bedding as a 'duvet' within his POV in previous chapters, but I thought Bobby-POV would identify it as an 'eiderdown', thus the discordant terminology. Maybe that was a dumb decision, since I ended up feeling like I had to explain it, because this type of bedding isn't traditionally used in the US... I don't really know why I wanted to contrast that, but I did, so I did. The Japanese kakebuton is functionally identical to the European duvet/eiderdown, but while the European variants have a plain white comforter with a colored/patterned cover over it, Japan does a colored/patterned comforter in a plain white cover with a window on the top.

Google-research for this chapter was phrases along the lines of "best brunch in manhattan", but I wasn't turning up much definitive answers because Google-maps doesn't have time-of-day in it's restaurant filter options and the Yelp listings that came up in my brunch-related searches kept taking me to webpages that didn't list brunch menus. After twenty minutes of frustrating myself I got annoyed and just switched over to image-search mode and pulled inspiration from "best brunch in manhattan" pictures.
“You were scared?” he asked, a sick feeling of guilt settling into his stomach.

“No, Not- Not really, nah, just- just felt stupid and shitty,” Zach stammered, shaking his head slightly, still firmly attached. “But- But then-- After that, I mean, I guess it’s ’cause yesterday was Piddle, so- so--”

“Piddle?” Daken asked, baffled. He didn’t think that sounded like a what-the-kids-are-saying kind of expression.

Daken rapped the back of his knuckles against Zach’s door and called, “It’s Daken.”

A few seconds later the door wrenched open, and a pajama-clad Zach was wobbling, overbalanced in his haste and trying to right himself. He got his weight centered and then hesitated a moment, staring at Daken with wide, worried eyes. “Are you--?” he mumbled.

“I’m sorry for snapping at you,” Daken said softly.

Zach threw himself against Daken, wrapping his arms around him. He was trembling. “It’s my fault. I was yelling and being dumb,” he whined. “I’m sorry.”

Daken returned the hug and kissed the crown of his head. “... You were scared?” he asked, a sick feeling of guilt settling into his stomach.

“No, Not- Not really, nah, just- just felt stupid and shitty,” Zach stammered, shaking his head slightly, still firmly attached. “But- But then-- After that, I mean, I guess it’s ’cause yesterday was Piddle, so- so--”

“Piddle?” Daken asked, baffled. He didn’t think that sounded like a what-the-kids-are-saying kind of expression.

“Philippine Independence Day, P.I.D., Uncle Marco always called it ‘Piddle’,” Zach explained. “And- And the whole family gets together.”

“And this is your first time missing it,” Daken realized.

“No, I mean yeah, but whatever, I don’t care,” Zach protested, shaking his head again. “But- But, I mean, everybody had to go, Lola wouldn’t hear ‘no’. So- So I guess she was mad I wasn’t there, and- and I guess she just found out…”

“... About the adoption,” Daken guessed.

“Yeah,” Zach agreed in an emotional squeak.

Daken had a feeling this conversation was just going to get more emotional. “Do you want to talk about it inside?”
“Um, yeah,” Zach said again, finally letting Daken go and retreating back into his room.

Daken followed him in and pulled the door shut behind him. “So how did you hear about it?” he asked gently, grabbing Zach’s desk chair and turning it around to sit down facing him as Zach climbed onto the bed and settled cross-legged.

“... I guess it musta taken Lola a while to get Mo--Maria to spill, or maybe it just took her a while to figure out how to use the phone,” Zach said, frowning down at the comforter he was sitting on and fidgeting. “And maybe she forgot about the time difference, or maybe she didn’t care, but she started trying to call me at, like, late, and- and I- I wasn’t really asleep but I... I didn’t wanna… So I sent her to voicemail. And she kept trying, like, four more times before she finally left one…” He swallowed hard, blinking a couple times. “Then she started trying again a couple hours ago… So I put my phone on D.N.D...”

Daken sighed, chewing on his lip for a moment “… Did you listen to her voicemail yet?”

“Yeah,” Zach whispered, nodding. “She’s really pissed…”

“I suppose it must have come as a shock,” Daken said softly.

“She doesn’t fucking care about me, she’s just scared the other stupid old ladies at church are gonna find out!” Zach spat, scowling.

“Do you think she’s going to keep calling until you talk to her?” Daken asked.

“... Not if I block her number,” Zach said with a sniff.

“Is that what you want to do?”

Zach made a soft, wordless whine as he wiped at his eyes with the heel of his hand. “I don’t know…” he whimpered.

Daken left the chair and moved over to sit on the edge of the bed, putting an arm around Zach. “... How’s her English?” he asked.

“Non-existent.”

“Spanish?”

“Sorta,” Zach said with a shrug and a shuddering inhale. “I mean, Spanish-ish, but not Spanish-Spanish… I’m pretty sure she understands Spanish-Spanish, but she talks a different kind.”

“Do you want me to try and talk to her?” Daken offered.

“Um,” Zach sniffed, rubbing at his eyes. “I... Maybe I could put her on speaker…”

“Sure,” Daken agreed.

Zach swallowed, staring down at his comforter for a minute or two before looking up at Daken with wide, wet eyes. “Now?”

“Doesn’t have to be,” Daken replied gently. “This is for you, so there’s no point doing it if you’re not ready.”

Zach looked down again, and fidgeted with the hem of his pantleg for another minute, before taking a deep, shaky breath and saying, “I think- I think rip off the bandaid.”
“Okay.” Daken reached over, plucking Zach’s phone off his nightstand, and handed it to him.

Zach took it, chewing his lip and squirming anxiously as he opened the contacts list and found his grandmother’s number. He paused for a moment, swallowing hard, before pushing the call icon and then speaker-phone. It went through one complete ring, then the line picked up halfway through the second and Zach started, “Lol--”

“Zacaris!” an elderly female voice cut him off and then started into a furious torrent of dense Chavacano. The accent was so thick and the syntax so impenetrable that Daken could barely pick out the keywords of Spanish. ‘Shame’, ‘abandon’, ‘monsters’, ‘disgrace’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘ungrateful’. Then Zach was snapping back at her; his accent was a more familiar California Spanglish sound, but he was no easier to understand than his grandmother because he was was already shrill and congested and talking twice as fast. ‘Old’, ‘selfish’, ‘don’t care’, ‘mean’, ‘shut up’, ‘alone.’

“Zach,” Daken put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed firmly. “Please calm down. You can’t have a meaningful conversation if--”

The woman started ranting again, volume half again as loud as before, apparently shocked and offended by Daken’s presence on the call. ‘Scoundrel’, ‘kidnapper’, ‘slaver’.

“<Missus Ocampo, Zach is not a slave or any kind of captive. He is a mutant,>” Daken cut in quickly. “<Your daughter and I both felt that in the current state of the world and its widespread anti-mutant sentiment, Zach’s interest and safety would be better served by-->”


Zach started screaming at the phone, irate and on the edge of tears, as Daken pieced together what his grandmother had just said. Then he reached over and pressed a finger to Zach’s lips, while squeezing his shoulder a bit harder. “<It’s common for mutants, Missus Ocampo. Most mutants don’t manifest until they’re teenagers,>” Daken said quickly, raising his volume to not be drown out by the woman. “<When they do, many mutants are abandoned, and even for the ones who aren’t, it becomes dangerous for them to remain with their parents. Zach was being attacked by a mob when the teachers of this school found him. The adoption was to protect both Zach and the rest of your family.>”


The accusation and threat were spat quickly back, and then the call ended as Zach was left sputtering in panicked fury. He stuttered a few half-words and then threw his phone at the wall and burst into tears. “No no no! She can’t do this! It’s not fair!”

“Zach, shhh shshshhh,” Daken hushed, wrapping him in an awkward sitting-hug. “You’re right. She can’t do anything,” he murmured calmly. “The adoption was legal, and her… lurid accusations are baseless.”

“She’s so gross! She’s a mean, gross old bitch!” Zach sobbed. “Why would she say that?!”

“... Southeast Asia and the Australasian islands have had a reputation for sex-tourism in recent history,” Daken said quietly, nausea settling in his stomach. “There were already a few centuries of colonial rape and sex-slavery, but in the modern era, underage brothels were, or in some places are, a big enough economic force in a few countries that sometimes there aren’t any statutory laws, or sometimes there are but they’re not enforced... Or sometimes the ‘age of consent’ is absurdly young. In Madripoor it’s twelve.”
“That’s- That’s insane,” Zach protested, looking up at him with a half-cringe and half skeptical look, trying to decide if Daken was lying. “Twelve’s a little kid!”

“Child prostitution happens everywhere in the world,” Daken said, his throat feeling painfully dry. “In ‘modern’ and ‘civilized’ countries, it just happens with a higher degree of secrecy… The brothel I was sold to as a child was protected and administered by the local crime family.”

Zach’s brow pinched and his eyes widened slightly as his mouth opened, then closed, smelling of a fresh surge of upset.

Daken shifted his gaze to the wall. “… Madripoor used to be one of the big ports for sex-tourism. Prostitution under eighteen became illegal six years ago, after Tyger’s syndicate put pressure on the prince to pass the law. She’s been enforcing it since, getting Madripoor off the list of destination vacation spots for foreign pedophiles… but not domestic ones. Marrying a twelve year old or just… keeping one around, that’s still legal.” Daken bit his lip and closed his eyes, swallowing against the feeling of bile in his throat. “Zach… when we were there, the doorman at the apartment building, the owners of the bodegas and restaurants we frequented… they probably would have assumed you were my catamite.” He swallowed again. “What your grandmother said… a lot of people can think along similar lines, because… well… maybe there’s more history tending to back it up than refute it.”

Zach made a little strained sound in the back of his throat and shook his head. “But- But it’s totally different for mutants, because we’re not born until we’re teenagers,” he said. “You didn’t adopt a teenaged human, you adopted a newborn mutant. There’s nothing creepy about that.”

“Yes,” Daken agreed, his next breath coming easier than the last. “That’s why I told her it’s a mutant thing. We may not be the only community with a affinity for found-family, but I think we have a higher tendency to formalize it legally than most. Your grandmother obviously didn’t believe me, but there’s enough precedent to call it a part of mutant culture.”

Zach was quiet for a minute. “… You mean if the police come.”

“Or feds,” Daken whispered. “If she goes to her local police to make the accusation, I’m not sure if they’d contact the NYPD or the FBI… I suppose that depends on whether or not they decide I ‘trafficked’ you.”

“But- But they can’t do nothing, right?” Zach whined.

“Not without evidence, or air-tight witness testimony, which obviously doesn’t exist,” Daken agreed. “So, really depends on whether or not somebody with enough influence, or enough money to sow the proper bribes, hates me enough to fabricate some witnesses.”

A few new shades of doubt and distress washed over Zach and he squirmed a little. “Lola’s got no money though, so- so it’s fine.”

“Of course. That was just a hypothetical,” Daken said quickly. “I don’t like calling anything impossible, because it seems like not much in this world is truly impossible, and that will tend to make any sweeping generalization technically a lie… But it’s very unlikely this would catch the attention of anybody who’s better at gaming the system than me.”

Zach relaxed and smiled up at him. “Because you’re the best at gaming the system.”

Daken smirked and sighed. “Speaking of games,” he murmured. “I thought that might be a good activity around which to structure a parley? In the interest of a cease fire and mending bridges et
Zach’s questioning look shifted into a definite frown. “... You want me to play games with Ice-Jerk,” Zach said in a flat voice.

“He suggested one of the tournament franchises. Street Fighter or Mortal Kombat or something,” Daken said. “We can order teriyaki and talk if you feel like talking, or if you don’t, you can just play the game.”

“... ’Cause you’re dating him,” Zach said, voice low and pinched.

“Yes,” Daken agreed softly. “… I’m not going to force you to spend time with him, I just hoped maybe we could try to find some common ground and move past the bad blood.”

“There was a lot of blood,” Zach growled darkly, looking down at his knee.

“So is that a ‘no’ then?” Daken asked.

Zach squirmed around in anxious frustration for a minute, before finally whining, “Fine. I’ll try.”

“Thank you,” Daken said, squeezing Zach’s shoulder and giving him a smile. “I really appreciate the effort.”

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“Because you don’t get enough of burgers living at a high school?”

“Or because I’m a cheap date and I like my ‘steak’ in burger form?” Bobby retorted. “Anyway, I’d be expecting a slightly better burger than school cafeteria tier.”

There was an amused huff at the other end of the line. “How about… Five Napkin, six o’clock?” Warren suggested.

“Well then we’re going to figure out what to do with the number seven,” Bobby noted.

“Will it involve your impression of The Count?”

“Probably,” Bobby chuckled. “Sounds perfect though, six it is.”

“I will put out the various fires in the company I’m neglecting, and see you then.”

“Cool. Have fun fire-fighting, buddy.”

Warren snorted. “Oh yeah. It’s a party,” he drawled before hanging up.

Bobby leaned back against the park bench he’d settled on, tilting his head up to the sky and closing his eyes as he grinned into the blue. He wondered if today was really as beautiful as it seemed, or if it was just his rose-tinted glasses. He stayed like that for a few minutes, before lifting his head and glancing at his phone again. He drew a deep breath, the air fragrant with cut grass and some flower sweetness, and opened his address book, flicking to the Js and poking the third one. He pressed ‘call’ and brought the phone to his ear. It picked up before the first ring ended, like always.

“Bonjour-hi.”

“So I have a boyfriend,” Bobby said.
“Where are you right now?” Jean-Paul asked.

“Uh, the park? The central one?” Bobby answered.

“More specifically?”

“The east side of Turtle Pond.”

“Ten minutes.”

“Okie-dokie,” Bobby was saying as he heard the beep of the connection ending. He slipped his phone into his pocket and leaned back against the bench again, draping his arms against the backrest. He tapped his foot and listened to birdsong and park-goers for about ten minutes, until a blur came careening around the curve of the path, then Jean-Paul was sliding onto the bench next to him, a brief wind gusting past as his wake kept on moving.


“Well he’s got black hair, blue eyes, jaw that coulda been carved from marble...” Bobby replied, grinning.

“Damn it, Bobby, details!”

Bobby laughed, and then quickly sobered as he considered the details. “So... Last night’s going to sound pretty messed up,” he said slowly, cringing a little. “And it was...”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Jean-Paul noted with a frown.

“Not in a creepy way. Well, I mean, it is creepy, but not on my part or his,” Bobby faltered awkwardly. “But, just to preface, the ‘now we’re dating’ decision didn’t come out of nowhere and wasn’t just a product of that mess. I’m pretty sure it was already coming up soon, because the past week I think Daken’s been running down a checklist of air that needed to be cleared first. Like, being really systematic about it.”

“Sounds organized,” Jean-Paul noted, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, he’s kinda type-A,” Bobby said with a lopsided smirk.

“Must get it from his mother.”

“Yeah probably,” Bobby agreed. “But, so, last night. Warren’s in town, and we were going to hang out, but then things went really really sideways.”

Daken poked at the screen of his burner as he strolled down the hall, toggling settings on the VPN, then logged into a Tumblr account that had been decorated with a difficult-to-read typeface in a difficult-to-read combination of garish colors and a tacky, animated background. He typed out a quick message.

Study “party” tonight. UGH! Its not a PARTY if we have to STUDY Tammy!

He hit post, and logged out, returned the phone to its normal settings, shut it off, and pulled the battery, before slipping it into his pocket and continuing along, stride unbroken. He reached the end of the hall and stepped out onto the staff deck, where he found that the collection of women there had arranged deckchairs with their heads together to better facilitate giggle-chatting as they
sun bathed. “Pryde?” he asked, approaching the cluster.

“Pull up a chair, Studly McHearthrob!” Rasputin called, pushing herself up on her elbows and casting Daken a grin. “I have it on good authority, meaning my own, that you strolled out of here this late-morning in the company of one handsome, young math teacher, stayed out for, oh hm, maybe about the span of a leeeisurely meal, and then made your glorious return to campus hand-in-hand. Give us dem juicy deets!”

Her brash demand earned a combination of stifled chuckles and scolds from the group, and Daken gave an amused snort, a smirk tugging at one side of his mouth. “Serious business first,” he replied, and squatted to be on eye-level as Pryde rolled over and sat up. “Zach’s grandmother apparently just heard about the adoption, and she is furious. She’s announced that she intends to go to the police because, roughly-translated quote: ‘only a pervert adopts a teenager’.”

Pryde’s face split into a grimace and she made a non-word sound, flopping back down against the deckchair. “That statement is upsetting on multiple levels,” she groaned.

“I am personally offended!” Dani announced.

“... So, what, you’re asking me to call Jen here or what?” Pryde sighed.

“I’m not asking you to do anything,” Daken shrugged. “I’m warning you that police or FBI might potentially show up to ask questions about me at some point. The adoption papers are legal, and I’m very much not an ephebophile, so it’ll just be a passing inconvenience… Well, it would perhaps be prudent…”

“To not bring up the Madripoor field trips or that you paid Zach’s mother off?” Pryde growled.

“I compensated her trauma. That’s legal,” Daken scoffed. “But, yes. There’s no need to volunteer any information they don’t specifically ask for.”

“When are you gonna get bar certified, Daken?” Rachel chuckled.

“I think my temper would need to get a little more reliable first,” Daken replied. “My main concern would be whether it’s police that show up or feds. Police won’t be able to get past the red-tape sealing my sanctuary case file, but feds might.”

“Why would the FBI involve itself in such a matter?” Aquilla asked.

“Zach’s from California, he’s in New York now. If somebody decided to take his grandmother’s accusations seriously, that would be trafficking across state lines,” Daken explained. “The FBI has a special taskforce for child sex-trafficking.”

“Which you just know off the top of your head,” Pryde sighed. “Another thing to not mention when cops and/or feds show up on our doorstep.”

“I knew that off the top of my head,” Dani inserted. “Not like it’s a secret or anything.”

“This is really harshing my sun-buzz,” Rasputin complained, trying to make her voice sound casual, but there was a dark, strained undercurrent. “Can we talk about you and Bobby now?”

“Are you asking me to kiss-and-tell, Rasputin?”

“Oooooh! Is that what I’m asking?”
“I mean, I know when I got hit with deathseed it was done the wrong, so didn’t so much root as
fester, and I never got… tied to a boss, so I only got, like, an airplane tequila-bottle sized sample of
the experience,” Bobby said slowly, trying to tread carefully to be as sensitive as he was capable
of. “But the times when I was there to see Apocalypse tugging on your deathseed-leash, it was
obvious you were mad about it. Like, later on you were fighting him hard and keeping control, but
even the first time I could tell you were annoyed every time he gave you an order.” He gritted his
teeth and wrinkled his nose as he dry-swallowed, looking down at the table. “Daken just… It was
like he was happy when it turned on… like he wanted to be controlled.”

Warren sighed, and when Bobby glanced up, he was nodding, eyes settled on nothing somewhere
to the side. “Yeah… That’s- That’s how… my horseman were… That kind of true-believer
serenity,” he said quietly, grimacing, pain and shame in his eyes. “I… I think it might be me.” He
bit his lip for a moment. “It keeps happening, now and again… I’m not going to pretend I
understand exactly what happened, scientifically or magically, when the lifeseed ‘broke’ my
deathseed, but the changes the deathseed had made to my body and my mutation when I ascended,
I don’t think they got undone… And since then, sometimes, I don’t know what triggers it, but,
just… people stop and stare at me and go into fervor like a televangelist congregation.”

“Maybe you’re just that pretty,” Bobby suggested, but failed his attempt to sound jokey.

“Bobby you haven’t been there when it’s happening, you haven’t seen it,” Warren said darkly,
putting his face in his hands for a minute. “At Sanctuary, I don’t know how I did it and I sure as
hell wasn’t trying, but that was the worst, I felt something that time, and it’s like- like it hasn’t
worn off… Every time I stop in, they’re way too excited about it, and Josh says they mope after I
leave.”

“So you’ve got a rapture-aura,” Bobby murmured, tapping the butt of his spoon against the table as
he turned that over in his head. “... You’ve always had a little more charm than seemed reasonable
though. I mean, you’re pretty, you’re legitimately very pretty, but the way you could always stroll
into any room or a damned alien planet, and everybody goes ‘oh who is that?’ It’s kind of a couple
notches above reasonable, isn’t it?”

Warren frowned down at the table. “So you think it’s some side dish on my mutation that was
weak enough before to scan as ‘just that pretty’, but the deathseed dialed up the volume?”

“Well, we never realized you had a healing factor until some shithead gutted you. Maybe if you
weren’t pretty, we would have noticed you were a bit too charming,” Bobby said with a shrug, and
then paused, now that this dark path had been brought to his attention, he couldn’t stop his mind
from wandering down it. “… Charm-ish powers would be pretty dangerous in an Apocalypse,
wouldn’t they.” His stomach clenched and he found a tremor running down his spine as he stared
at the little cup-candle on their table. “... The fact that Original-Recipe got himself resurrected and
he’s out there alive somewhere… Is that the only thing that’s keeping Daken from ascending?”
Bobby whispered.

A tense silence stretched between them for a few minutes, before Warren quietly answered, “No, I
don’t think it’s the only thing… Like you said yourself, Daken was way too eager to take orders
yesterday.” He folded his arms atop the table and leaned forward, propping himself against his
elbows. “He may be aggressively sassy, but it seems like… he’s geared a lot more submissive than
he wants to admit… And that may be a useful trait in a horseman but not in an Apocalypse.” He
paused for a minute, and then added, “And there’s you.”

Bobby frowned, glancing up at him, confused about what the last statement meant and not really
sure he wanted clarification.

“Now you’re another thing standing between Daken and that deathseed reformatting his drive,” Warren said. “You’ve hit the off button on it twice now, right? And it kind of sounds like you’re planning on sticking close to him for a while. Seems to me that near you is a good place for him to be these days.”

Bobby felt relief trickle through him. “Thanks. Obviously the whole thing is terrifying, but that does help.”

“For him too, I bet.” Warren replied, with a fragile smile on his mouth that didn’t reach the rest of his face.

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Daken lounged on his sofa, distractedly surfing through news feeds on his phone until he heard the chirp of an incoming message. He picked the mini-notebook up off his coffee table to see an unfamiliar username in the instant messaging window.

you good?

The response had come late enough that he’d started to worry, either that Bobby might get back first or that his message had been missed entirely. He typed a quick reply.

*some n00b bich is camping me*

The lingo might be outdated, if it had ever been ‘cool’ at all, and probably would have inspired an eye-roll from Zach, but it was brief and ‘close enough’ to fly under the radar of any bots or spooks.

*im in the next zone*
*i can get there in two*

Daken clenched his teeth. A lot could happen in two days. A vindictive fed could get a lot done. But any alternatives took too much risk, so he typed back,

*thanx u rock*

He watched the other user log off, before logging off himself, switching his IP address back to the United States, shutting down, and pulling the battery. Instead of putting the little computer back in the safe it had come from, he dropped it into his messenger bag next to his current burner and a handful of flash drives; in the morning he’d make a run to the bank to leave all the questionably-legal data he wasn’t yet ready to destroy in a safe deposit box rented to an alias. Daken dropped himself back onto the couch and pulled out his legit-phone again, going back to the news feeds for a while. This time he was interrupted by a text, and found himself smiling.

*Are you still up?*

Daken thumbed back,

*You think I’m waiting up for you?*
*What am I, your mother?*

He pushed himself off the sofa and walked over to his door, pulling it open and leaning against the jamb. Another text came, and he glanced down at the phone.
You’re taller than my mother.

That fell somewhat short of his usual standards. Had the dinner with Worthington gotten overly stressful?

As much as I appreciate your support of the written word, stop stalling and get in my bed.

Daken listened for it and caught the sound of feet on the stairs, and a minute later Bobby appeared on the landing. He cast Daken a grin when he spotted him. “Hey.”

Daken tilted his head slightly and graced Bobby with a soft smile for a moment before making a show of looking at his phone. “‘You’re taller than my mother.’” He glanced back up with a skeptically raised eyebrow. “What exactly is the punchline here?”

“The punchline is shut up I’m tired,” Bobby retorted, rolling his eyes and grimacing. When he reached Daken, he pulled him into a loose hug, dropping his face against Daken’s shoulder for a minute, then lifting his head to put a light kiss against Daken’s neck and pull gently back. “I’m gonna go brush my teeth and all that jazz. Be back in a few?”

Daken caught his lips for a moment before letting go. “Patience isn’t my key virtue,” he whispered.

“I’ve noticed,” Bobby chuckled. “I’ll be quick.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

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