**Ties that bind**

by gealach

**Summary**

When news of Logan sightings gets out, Daken joins the Hunt for Wolverine only to vanish without a trace. It's up to Laura, and to the rest of his family, to save him - but finding him is only the first step.

**Notes**

Welcome to my new long-fic, where I sure hope to save Daken from whatever Mariko Tamaki has in store for him. I’m guessing – fervently hoping – she’ll pick up this narrative thread in her X-23 solo, but I can’t wait for that, I’m too worried. I needed to write, and thus this fic was born. It’s not completely outlined as of yet (the thing, after all, hit the stores just today and I’ve been a worried bundle of nerves ever since and my brain doesn’t react well
under stress) but I had to at least get the first chapter out of my system. So don’t expect an update right away, but it will come soon-ish.

Tags will be added as I figure things out, and additional warnings will be found in the Author Notes at the beginning of each chapter.

Needless to say, this story is set after *Claws of a Killer* #4.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“So this is why you didn’t want me to come with you?”

Laura cocked her head, the wireless earbud hidden by her hair. The pub was a bit on the rough side: the kind you choose only when you’re running low on money, you don’t know where else to go, or you need to talk without being overheard; the kind of place where everybody minds their own business.

Laura lingered on the doorway just enough to spot her mark, letting Gabby get a good overview of the place through her sunglasses.

“Right, you can’t answer.” Her sister sighed. “It looks fun, though. Maybe we can go sometime?” A pause; Laura could almost hear her pout. “Fine, be that way. Daken would bring me with, he’d say it’s a formative experience.”

Daken wouldn’t be caught dead in this kind of establishment and would never expose Gabby to it and Gabby knew it, but that was all right; she was just trying to mask her worry.

They hadn’t heard from him in days and Laura was beginning to itch as well. It wasn’t out of character for him to go on radio silence – especially lately, with the rumors of Logan’s return – but he’d been meant to get in touch once he was finished investigating, and he’d never done that. As far as Laura knew, the last person that had seen him was in this pub… and had contacted Laura on her own, so Laura would give her the benefit of the doubt before attacking her.

“Creed isn’t here,” she whispered into the mic. “But be quiet.” She waded in the crowd, resolutely not looking at the T.V., that held most of the patrons’ attention. She caught a glimpse of the school, and what she heard was enough.

_Vultures_. She seethed, but Logan didn’t need her right now.

She sat opposite Deathstrike. “Where’s my brother?”

To her credit, the woman didn’t wince at her sudden appearance. In fact, she looked subdued; she was almost slouching in her seat, her hands below the table. This wasn’t a threatening gesture; Laura couldn’t smell the metallic scent of her unsheathed claws.

“Laura.” Deathstrike nodded at her. Her gaze shifted minutely, uncomfortably; if she’d been uneasy
before, now Laura’s worry skyrocketed.

“What have you done with him, Deathstrike?” There was no need of threatening gestures from her; the woman knew very well the thin ice she was treading on.

“Nothing.” It was difficult, with her kind, but after weeks of forced cohabitation Laura was attuned to this specific cyborg’s tell-tale signs: she didn’t seem to be lying. “I swear. There was a… situation.” She paused. Laura forced herself to stay still, to not snap at her; that wouldn’t accomplish anything. “I assume you knew he was with me?”

“And Creed. Yes.” Laura gritted her teeth. She should have given Daken some backup, but with the chaos that were those last few days before Logan’s return, she hadn’t been able to. There had just been too many trails to follow, and Daken had said he could easily handle Creed and Deathstrike and whatever came their way, be it even Logan.

He’d been itching to do something, anything; the inaction was driving him crazy, the notion that Logan could be out there had marked him in ways Laura knew she couldn’t understand. And so she’d let him go without help, and now something had happened, and she’d never forgive herself.

Deathstrike tilted her head. “I would have contacted you earlier, but I needed to take care of something.” Her left hand emerged from under the table and Laura stared.

It wasn’t clear at first glance, but she had a new hand. There were lines just below her wrist, and if one looked closely, a few wires slipped through.

Something had cut her hand off, and she hadn’t healed.

Laura’s blood run cold. She heard Gabby’s voice in the earbud, asking what did Deathstrike mean, but she couldn’t answer. She had no answer – she didn’t want to have an answer.

“Explain,” she managed to say. Her voice sounded like gravel. Deathstrike looked away, her gaze seemingly captured by the T.V.

“We were looking for Logan,” she began. Her eyes turned into slits as she caught sight of him. From what Laura could hear, he was dispersing the crowd of journalists pestering the students, but she didn’t turn to check. “We knew Daken would be a liability – we thought he’d try to stop us – but we wanted to use him as a reverse Logan detector.”

Daken had counted on that. “Go on.”

“We ended up in some deserted town – but it wasn’t deserted. Someone was conducting experiments there, reviving people – we were attacked by zombies.” Laura ignored Gabby’s excited exclamation, her blabbering about her outing with Deadpool. Bless her, she still had no idea what was coming.

“And there was something, a device – it shut our healing factors off. Mine still hasn’t returned. Daken –” Deathstrike grimaced. Laura knew the next words that would come out of her mouth before the woman even said them. “Creed saw him die.”

At least Gabby could scream. Laura felt she couldn’t react in any way, something cold and hard squeezing her stomach. Deathstrike seemed genuinely sorry, but that didn’t mean anything to Laura.

She took off her earbud, so she wouldn’t hear Gabby’s wailing anymore – though it broke her heart to do so. She needed to focus.

“You left him behind?” she questioned sharply. She knew that was a possibility, in the field; and there was no love lost between Daken and Creed, and if the situation had been as dire as Deathstrike
was making it to be, their last thought would have been coming back for a corpse.

But Deathstrike had spoken of reviving experiments, and she knew as well as Laura what a feast Daken’s – God – Daken’s corpse would be.

No, he wasn’t dead. Laura feared that he was very much alive by now, and would be used as well.

Deathstrike sighed. “We had to. We destroyed the compound and hightailed the hell out of there. Creed was about to abandon me too, but he took me and dumped me to my Reavers. I haven’t seen him since.” She straightened up. “I did go back with the boys, once I was all in one piece. He deserved at least that,” she murmured, “but it was too late. There was no sign of Daken.” She grimaced. “I think –”

“They took him.”

“Yes.”

Silence fell; they let the chatter of the pub wash over them. Laura didn’t manage to speak yet, not quite. Deathstrike had done her a courtesy; Laura wouldn’t have expected the woman to go out of her way to get Daken back and then contact her, but then again, what they’d shared in Mystque’s clutches had seemed to build something between them all. Deathstrike was honoring that bond, perhaps; but ultimately, her motivations didn’t matter.

What mattered was that Daken had been taken again. He’d be used. She had to save him; and if he was dead, she had to retrieve his corpse and give him a burial where his rest couldn’t be disrupted.

“I need all your intel,” she said eventually, and Deathstrike nodded.

“Yes, of course.” She handed Laura a small pen drive. “It’s not much. Location, blueprints. The address where I stocked the pieces of the device that were still there. And – a name. Daken had heard them say a name, but I didn’t find anything about it. Soteira. I don’t know if it’s a company name, or something else.” She pursed her lips. “I’m sorry.”

She smelt like she was.

Laura pocketed the pen drive and the earbud. She could still hear Gabby’s crying coming from it. Her sister would be inconsolable; Laura would have to try and comfort her, when she had no words to comfort herself. If she stopped for a moment to truly think about it, she’d crumble; she had to keep on the move, keep focused on the job – find Daken.

Find him, and bring him home.

She stood up. “Thank you for calling me,” she said rigidly. Deathstrike bowed her head with a finality that shook Laura to the core.

This wasn’t the end. It couldn’t be. She’d find her brother; she’d save him. She had to.

She would.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Laura enlists help.
The world, apparently, hadn’t changed one bit.

A guy couldn’t come back from the dead without everyone he knew being harassed and questioned. Logan would have preferred to weather the whole “reviving after years” thing on his own, but Hank and ’Ro and Kitty and frankly everyone had been so damn worried – although relieved to see him again. They wanted to prod at him and understand what had happened, and while he wanted that too – he didn’t remember anything after his death, and the whole thing left a bad taste in his mouth, as if he’d regressed to his pre-M-day state – the situation, what with the constant presence of reporters on the front lawn, was starting to grate on his nerves.

Still, ’Ro had asked, and so he was staying.

There was so much to get reacquainted to, so much he’d missed – so much he’d lost. Not a day went by without him discovering something new. Scott was dead… and Jeannie was alive. They’d gone to war with the Inhumans. They were currently living in Central Park, for God’s sake.

Scott was dead, and Jeannie was alive. He didn’t know what had him reeling the most; but he hadn’t seen her yet, and he guessed that when that happened it would hit him harder.

There was an old counterpart of him going around, and meeting him had been like looking into a distorted mirror, and not liking at all what he saw.

Somewhere, M.I.A. and possessed by some alien entity, he had a son from an alternate reality. They still hadn’t found him, but they were looking.

That hit too close home in ways he was majorly uncomfortable with, and Logan tried not to think about it too much.

He resolutely didn’t think about what came to his mind whenever he did.

He was tired. He’d been examined and questioned by his oldest friends, but he had no answer for them. At some point there had even been talks of locking him up – Murdock was especially concerned – but the X-Men had opposed violently. They’d keep an eye on him, and that was it. He just had to trust them and wait, but that felt almost impossible to him.

He had no idea what had happened to him and he wanted some peace – and he couldn’t even have that. Today was just the last straw; seeing the kids trying to relax on the front lawn and being chased and interrogated by the media instead had sent his teeth on edge.
So he’d gotten out and given the jackals a piece of his mind; but that hadn’t helped that much. And the kids –

Ever since his return, they always looked at him with various degrees of awe and alarm; they walked on eggshells around him. He was a legend or a liability, no in-between; always dangerous, though, and no one dared approach him – especially not the new ones.

He needed a beer.

He resolutely ignored the audience he’d drawn – he spared a glance that he hoped would be reassuring for ’Ro – and stormed back inside, headed for the teachers’ kitchen. He didn’t want to succumb to old habits, but he was tired of being constantly overwhelmed, of not knowing. He hated everything about this.

As he approached the kitchen he heard gut-wrenching sobs coming from one of the lounges and he steered to a halt. It sounded like a kid – so he should at least check – but he smelled his old counterpart too, and Laura, so the situation was being handled.

Having made up his mind, he went for his destination; but he did slow down to get a glimpse into the room, just to see Laura – who wasn’t there.

Gabby. Right. Laura had been cloned, and Laura was mentoring the child. The kid was bright and chatty and had taken to him immediately, saying he would be like a honorary dad to her – his heart had almost given up at hearing that – and even managing to work in something that had sounded – if that could even be possible – like a cheerful threat: if he ever upset Laura, little Gabby would “end him”.

Nice kid, all things considered. It was nice to know Laura was taking care of someone like that; his heart swelled with pride. She’d grown up so much – it still startled him when he looked at her.

Laura was nowhere in sight – he’d obviously smelt the girl – so he felt compelled to at least ask what was going on.

He couldn’t have anticipated the wreck Gabby would turn into at his sudden appearance. She let out a wail and buried her face against the old man’s chest, who awkwardly patted her hair. He didn’t seem at all equipped to comfort a crying child – although that could be Logan’s strange, visceral dislike of him talking – so Logan took some more steps into the room.

“What happened, sweetheart?” he said softly, wondering if that would even work on her. He was, after all, a stranger; she knew the old one best. Perhaps he should locate one of the others, or try to contact Laura, but he felt morose; he could be of use. He could help. He could be there for his family, damn it all. He felt the need to make up for the lost time. Kids grew so fast. He couldn’t support Laura anymore; if anything, she seemed to have taken the reins and turned into a confident adult. She was among his rescuers, one of the first faces he’d seen, and he’d never forget how stunning a sight she made.

Gabby still hadn’t answered; he sat on the nearest couch and exchanged a glance with the old man, who just grimaced and held her tighter, her tiny body wracked by sobs.

“What sweetheart?” Logan motioned for her, and when the old man didn’t shake his head, he touched lightly her shoulder.

The girl bawled and turned on the spot, launching herself at him, fists balled around his shirt, yanking fiercely. It took a while to understand what she was muttering. “I’m so sorry, it’s not right,
it’s not right, I’m so sorry –”

At his questioning glance, the old man just grimaced more. He aborted a motion – he’d seemed to be going for Logan’s shoulder – and heaved a sigh.

“Better wait for Laura,” he grumbled. “She’ll make more sense. Don’t cross that bridge yet. Try to keep level-headed, son.” The look he gave Logan was pensive and speculative.

“I’m you,” Logan retorted stupidly, stuck on the last word the man had used.

“Sure hope you don’t live through what I lived through.” With a groan, the old man stood up. “Hold steady.” This time, he did clasp his shoulder, leaving Logan waiting for the other shoe to drop. Something was obviously wrong here, and he had no clue.

Still, he didn’t dare to ask, not with the girl so heart-broken in his arms; and they stayed frozen like that for a while, until Laura came.

She appeared in the doorway like a vengeful goddess. She smelt distinctly upset and there was fire in her eyes, but she smoothed her features into a soft, reassuring mask as she came over and sank to her knees next to Gabby, all her attention focused on the girl. Logan and the old man might as well not have existed.

“Gabby,” she murmured quietly. “Gabby.”

The kid turned in Logan’s arms. Her eyes were red and puffy, her face blotchy. The sight squeezed Logan’s heart. She was so small and must have lived through hell already; what could have upset her so much?

Laura’s presence seemed to do the trick; Gabby stopped sobbing, though she was still wailing. She stared helplessly as Laura caught her hands and spoke gently. “It’s going to be all right. We’re going to find him, and we’re going to save him.”

The child sniffled.

“Do you hear me, Gabby? We’ll save him. We’ll bring him back home.”

“Promise?” The girl’s voice was faint, wrecked.

A shadow passed over Laura’s face, but it was gone quickly, replaced by a steely confidence he hadn’t ever seen on her. This wasn’t a child weapon gritting her teeth to do what was asked of her, but a parent, or an aunt, comforting her ward.

She made him so proud.

“Promise.” Only decades of experience allowed him to hear the quiver in Laura’s voice. Gabby hadn’t certainly heard it, because she offered a tremulous smile and flung herself at Laura.

His daughter embraced Gabby lightly, a hand caressing her back, the other running over her hair. Now that she wasn’t looking confidently at the kid, she let go for a moment, letting him and the old man see the haunted look in her eyes. Once again, Logan wondered what was happening. He knew he wouldn’t like it, but it was family, and he’d be there. They talked about a him – had they found the boy, perhaps? Jimmy?

Laura locked gazes with the old man and something passed between them; he nodded, and her shoulders sagged in relief for a fraction of a second. It hurt, just a little bit, that she had that with
someone else now; that she didn’t turn to Logan for help.

But it amazed him too.

Then she turned to Logan, and there was a quiet determination in her eyes that, for a moment, made cold dread run through his veins.

She seemed to have taken a decision; she lightly patted Gabby on her back and slowly extricated herself from the vicious hold. “Go with Old Logan, Gabby. I need to talk with Logan.”

The kid winced. She threw a strange, tortured, but ultimately hopeful glance at him and then took the old man’s hand.

When the door closed softly behind them, Laura sighed heavily. She leaned on an armrest as she hoisted herself up and then she sat down on the couch opposite Logan.

He didn’t like her expression at all. She seemed to be holding herself together with some tremendous effort, and he didn’t want that for her. He’d never wanted it, but she’d had to grow up while he was gone, and now she probably thought she had to take it all upon her shoulders.

That wouldn’t do. He was here now. He was back, and he’d help.

“Talk to me,” he said encouragingly. “Talk me through it. I’ll help.”

She scoffed, taking him aback. Before he had the time to ask her the meaning of it, she shook her head, passed a hand through her hair. On her face were lines he hadn’t noticed before; creases of worry, hard and terrible.

“This wasn’t,” she paused and shut her eyes briefly. “It wasn’t how I wanted to tell you the news. It would need careful planning and I was sure you’d go at each other’s throats and it would have taken weeks just to have him agree. I wanted to make this work,” she added a little desperately. Logan, still out of his depth, nonetheless felt a foreboding shiver run down his spine. “That’s why I didn’t – we didn’t tell you. I knew you’d be difficult too,” she said in an almost, not-quite-there venomous tone that surprised him as much as the scoff. “And now –” she trailed off, and she was just as lost and scared as when he’d first met her.

“Laura.” He held up a hand as he’d done so many years ago, when he’d first met her; as he did when he confronted a skittish deer. “Just tell me what’s happening.”

She reacted to that as if it were an order, the words seemingly pulled out of her mouth. “Your son needs help.”

There was a pit of dread in his stomach, but he refused to acknowledge it. “You found Jimmy?”

The furious light was back in her eyes. “No, not the son you haven’t fucked up yet,” she said evenly. “Daken. Daken needs help.”

He bit back the protestation that was almost out of his lips – lies, excuses, his old surge of guilt and abject relief, he had fucked up the boy but he’d had to – and the questions – when and how had Daken gotten so close with Laura, with Gabby? – and strived not to disappoint his daughter further. “What happened?”

She nodded as if he’d confirmed something, and maybe he had. “That’s hearsay, but it won’t be for long. Hank’s on it and we’ll go check as soon as you’re ready – they’re ahead of us as it is, time is of the essence.” She stood up as she talked and he didn’t interrupt her for clarification, knowing she
was getting to it – fearing to see that side of her again. Dreading to see a Laura that didn’t think so highly of him anymore. “He was murdered. His body’s gone and, from witness report, I’m almost sure he was taken by the ones who had you. *Soteira.*”

Just the name made him want to retch. He didn’t remember anything, but whenever he heard the word – when he was asked if he knew who or where they were, what they wanted – he always found himself covered in cold sweat.

Kitty had showed him a video of him. It seemed he’d been working for this Soteira group as an assassin and that he’d done it willingly – and he didn’t remember *anything* of it. It was a miracle he’d been let go at all; for a while he’d feared there was something inside him to make him a sleeper agent, but Rachel had checked and then dismissed that possibility. He was clean.

He’d simply been let go – and now that he knew whoever had him now had his son, he could venture a guess as to why.

Laura was looking at him; he tried to radiate composure. “They can’t have him,” he said quietly. The mere thought that his son – his wayward, complicated son – had been taken by the same shadows that had held him, that had revived and used him… who knew what could they do to him? Who knew what he could be persuaded to do, without any nudging on Soteira’s part?

Logan would look for him, but not only because Laura was asking or because he was his son.

But because, if what he found was something too monstrous to live, he’d have to put it down again.

It was a burden he wouldn’t put on anyone else; certainly not Laura, that seemed to care deeply for Daken.

But she didn’t know him, not really. Not like Logan.

This was on him, and he’d take care of it.

Chapter End Notes

*Next: The asset wakes up.*
The asset wakes up.

Chapter Notes

**Additional warnings:** non-linear narrative, suicidal thoughts, past conditioning.

Oh, and obviously we're going AU. I won't follow canon; I'm terribly disappointed in today's *Dead Ends*.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

3.

He came to.

He was. There was something, something, something he’d forgotten. A flutter, a warmth, faraway.

[L-La-Lau–]

He was. He breathed and walked and sat down and run and fought. Killed. Slick, hot, wet blood.

He was. He fought. His state of being was – nebulous. He fought. He was a fighter. A killer. They – someone – wanted him to

[not again not again n o t a g a i n]

kill people. It was his job. He was good at that –

[very good at that, so very good, what a good boy]

He was so very good at that. They liked that. His masters

[no no no no not again]

were ecstatic. He was being – assessed. Yes. He was being assessed so he had to be very good and show off his skills. He liked to show off his skills. It gave warmth and recognition and –

[nonsense. Sentiment. Fight for yourself, not to vie for a pat in the back, pathetic -]

Confusion. He was defective. He broke off and that was not good, a liability in the field. Stop and stare into distance. Something wasn’t working. He was more susceptible than Wolverine, but the underlying whatever-it-was got in the way too.

[flicker. Almost got it, but no. No]

Had to reprogram. It would take more time than Wolverine. Walk and walk and walk and walk and lie down and rest. We’ll take care of this. We’ll have him up and running in no –

He came to. He was.
He was, he was, he was, he was, he was, he was…

[Leave me alone, leave me alone, let me die, god let me die]

… he was, he was, he was, he was, he was, he was –

Jesus Christ, put him under. What the –

He came to. He was.

Was he going to work now? He looked fine. Better than yesterday.

Jesus, yesterday.

What the fuck was that, man?

He was going to work because it was what he was. He worked. Fought. Killed. There was no other life. That was what he was made to do. Be useful. He was a very good boy who knew his place: follow orders and follow them well.

Okay, I’ll take that for now. Release the others.

Coming at him. He was being assessed. Being assessed was important because your value influenced how much you got to eat and rest to be functional. A good weapon needs sleep and food, a sloppy weapon gets none of that because it must get better first. Blood. Blood, blood, blood. That’s the way of life. He needed to be very, very good because he was being assessed.

He was covered in blood and guts. He was good. A good boy.

Well, that’s – okay. I can work with that. We can work with that, right?

As long as it gave them results he could call himself the Queen of England for all they cared.

Was he aware? He seemed not quite there. Could he work, say, undercover? Could he retain basic independence? If all they wanted was canon fodder, they’d have stuck to cloning.

Clo–

[Laura? Laura. Gabby. Gabby Gabby Gabby Laura Laura Laura Laura Laura oh god help, help –]

[blood blood blood blod and guts all over him, he was, he was being used]

[Someone help me oh god please someone, Laura, Laura, Laura]

[what was, what were, where was –]

[stupid, idiot, fight back, fight back you have weapons, stupid idiot boy fight back, fight back, fight back, you can, you –]

Put him under.

[won’t take you alive, defective, won’t be used by none other than me]

[no no no no no no no]

Jesus Christ, put him under!
He came to. He was.

He was a good boy. A good soldier. A good weapon. He did what he was told.


He was good. He was the best.

Exhilarated laughter. Yes he was. God, they were starting to think they should have stuck with Wolverine.

Was he under control now? No more glitches?

Supposedly. They should monitor him for a while yet, before sending him out. Just to be sure.

There was no need for that because he was good. He was amazing. But his masters knew best, of course.

Was he aware? Fully operational? Capable of critical thinking?

Of course he was. He was the best. Trained to be. Could plan in a second. Outsmarted gods.

Oh, I want to hear that story one of these days. All right, gentlemen, we’ve got ourselves a new asset. Who are you, boy?

Akihiro. Daken.

And what will you do for us, boy?

Whatever you want.

That’s right. Damn right. He’ll do whatever we want because he’s such a good boy.

He was.

Snickers.

All right, that’s a wrap, gentlemen. Put him under, will you? The boy needs his rest, after all.

Seriously, what’s up with th–

He came to. He was.

Status: waiting for assignment.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Laura reveals something to Logan.
There was nothing to find anymore.

The location – an abandoned town – had been swept up. She’d thought they could still find something Deathstrike hadn’t noticed; it was worth the try. But they hadn’t found anything yet, and Laura was beginning to think they wouldn’t.

They were searching the area in pairs – going alone would have been quicker but more dangerous – and, so far, she’d just managed to smell Creed and someone that smelt like him. In the other half of the town, Old Logan said he smelt Daken and Deathstrike too, in some warehouse. Logan had crunched up his nose at that, but he hadn’t said anything. Good. She thought she was very close to snapping at him.

It was uncharitable of her to feel that way, perhaps; but Logan had no idea of what had happened while he was gone, what they’d all been through. His mind was made already; and holding explanations off was dangerous.

This wasn’t ideal. It should have gone so differently; she should have sat him down to explain how she and Daken had come to care for each other, the things that had happened. But the jet or these empty streets weren’t the place for that, nor did she want Gabby to be present for that conversation; and so she’d have to wait for their return at the school. She only hoped Logan waited before he jumped to some twisted conclusion.

But she’d seen how out of depth he was. He looked taken aback at the mere notion of Laura caring for Daken; and he’d stared in shock when Gabby had jumped into the jet in Old Logan’s wake, stating firmly she’d come with because Daken needed her too.

When Laura had first said that Daken was in trouble, Logan had visibly recoiled. His first thought had been for a son he’d never known, not for the one he already had; that had stung deep. She wanted to snarl at him – but Logan had his problems too. The only reason why she hadn’t torn at him yet was that he’d just returned from the dead; that he’d been violated for months, maybe years, and no one had even noticed. She felt she’d failed him; but at least he was back now, and fine – or as fine as he could be – and so she’d worry about Daken.

She’d have to sort out her feelings later. When she found Daken. Then she’d have the time to understand how to feel about Logan, especially in the wake of Stark’s revelation; but not now.

Logan came to a halt. He was a few steps ahead of her – she’d let him take charge, let him feel useful – and he was sniffing at the wreckage of a pick-up. When she came closer, she understood why.
Logan didn’t turn as she approached. “They came together,” he said quietly. The calmness was merely apparent; if he’d had hackles, they’d have stood on end. “Explain to me why Daken was with Creed and Yuriko?” Oh, he had his own idea already: his good-for-nothing son, associating himself with scum.

She hadn’t explained the identity of the informant exactly because of that, but it was only a matter of time before he smelt the truth, before he asked. Once again, she cursed herself for not sitting him down earlier, but there hadn’t been time for that before coming here.

Laura reached him in front of the pick-up. It seemed that Daken had travelled in the back. “They wanted to kill you. Daken went with them to stop them from doing that if they did find you.”

She knew that wouldn’t be enough – that Logan wouldn’t believe it – as soon as the words came out of her mouth. Logan released a small puff of air – amusement, disbelief? – and turned to look at her.

“Daken was to protect me?” His eyes were a bit sad; he seemed almost to feel sorry for her, as if he thought she’d fallen for his deviant son’s tricks.

She crossed her arms. “Yes,” she said, daring her to contradict her here and now. “He was.”

She’d hoped he could at least trust her judgement, but she saw now that it had been wishful thinking. Well, there was nothing for it. They had to have this conversation eventually.

She’d just hoped not to have to on a tight schedule, when every minute lost meant Daken spending a minute more in the hands of unscrupulous monsters.

He sighed. “Laura –”

“You don’t believe me.” She nodded – not to confirm his doubts, but to acknowledge them. “You don’t believe it possible. You can’t fathom how the son you drowned in a puddle could possibly want to protect you.” He winced at that reminder, but she hadn’t said it out of malice; it was, perhaps, a legitimate doubt. She had to remember that Logan had been gone for so long: the last he knew of Daken was that his son hated him. “He moved on, Logan. He had to; we all had to. He’s grown.” And oh, how she wished she could show Logan how much, how beautifully Daken was growing. He was trying – it was a hard road, but he was willing to try. He trusted Laura to hold his hands.

“He beat me up, Laura.” Logan was shaking his head. “When he was revived, when I was captured, he was working with the Apocalypse twins. They captured me, and he… he beat me up while I was down, Laura. You do know it, I remember I told you –”

“He was under the influence of a Death Seed,” she said patiently, as patiently as she’d explained the X-Men after his recent attack at the school. Only Iceman had appeared willing to believe her, and had seemingly done the math already, if his letting Daken go was anything to go by. He’d even gotten rid of the Death Seed, and while Daken had no intention to thank him, Laura knew her brother was relieved.

Logan turned to lean against the pick-up while he worked his jaw. He seemed desperate to sway her his way, but he wouldn’t succeed. She knew her brother far more than Logan had ever known his son, too caught up in self-hatred to perceive anything else.

“The boy hates me, Laura,” Logan finally settled on something he was sure he could always cling to. “With good reasons, at least now,” he added quickly, before she could retort. “I know. I killed him and we’ll never come back from that. If I could have handled things differently… I would have. But
I had intel, Laura, intel telling me he’d murder the students –”

“Hearsay, from a future you couldn’t even know if it truly was ours in the first place,” she said firmly, and he hung his head, because he knew it was true. Then she softened her voice, because fair was fair. They’d talked about it, Daken and her. She’d wanted to understand and she’d eventually managed to earn his trust. And what he hadn’t told her, she’d gleaned. “I understand it was a tough call, Logan. He’d hurt Evan badly, and he was goading you –” No, she wouldn’t say that Daken had been suicidal far before Logan’s death; it wasn’t her place. If Logan hadn’t understood yet, perhaps some day he would. “I’m telling you that he moved past that. He’s different now – more at peace. If you could meet him, talk to him, you’d see.” Her throat closed; as of now, that was wishful thinking as well.

They had to find him soon. They had to save him.

Logan seemed similarly affected, at least a bit; there was a grimace on his face, and he squeezed his eyes shut. “You said it would be difficult to arrange a meeting. Doesn’t seem like the boy moved past it at all – and he shouldn’t.” He shook his head; when he opened his eyes, he was his usual stubborn self. He’d see what he wanted to see, and she couldn’t allow it. The least she could do was to make it so that when they found Daken – not if, when – Logan would be receptive, wouldn’t throw in the towel just because he thought Daken was beyond his reach.

“After you died,” she began, hoping Daken would forgive her for this transgression, “there was an auction, in Madripoor. They were selling pieces of you – blood, two claws.” She paused, but Logan just stood there and listened quietly. It must be jarring – although not surprising – to hear how people had jumped to the opportunity to create their own super-soldier.

It was like Soteira had done, after all – even though they’d gone after the source itself.

And then they must have decided that it wasn’t enough… that having Daken at their disposal would be better.

Laura gritted her teeth and resumed her tale, hoping to get through to Logan, to make him see. Hoping he’d at least try.

“Daken stopped the auction,” she said quietly. “He crashed it, really. He made an example of the attendants, killing almost all of them. He made it clear that no one was to disturb your rest; rumors followed quickly, and no one dared trying anything for a good while –” She broke off, because Logan’s breathing had changed.

His eyes were closed, his expression pained; he was, maybe, thinking back on the hole in his memory. Soteira obviously hadn’t heeded the warning, and this story only went to further his distress. She hadn’t wanted to make him think of it; she couldn’t have worked around it, but she should have trodden with more caution.

And yet, this tale was the one Logan needed to hear. She could regale him with what had come after, with events that had brought her closer and closer with Daken; but none of that would graze Logan if he wasn’t presented with tangible proof. He’d always think that Daken had a hidden agenda in befriending her, that he’d ultimately betray her; he needed to hear this.

She caught Logan’s hand. It was different enough from what she’d have done when Logan was alive that he was startled from his state, and he opened his eyes. His gaze landed far away as he pretended to scan the horizon.

“So he didn’t want me back,” he croaked, and she’d have snatched her hand away at that, at seeing
what he chose to take from the story. But she wasn’t finished yet, and she was battling with years of crushed hope and shattered dreams: Logan had clashed with Daken enough times to be too afraid to let himself believe anything anymore.

She squeezed Logan’s hand. “He needed those remains. He held a funeral for you,” she murmured. Logan’s heart skipped a beat, and he held his breath almost imperceptibly. “A traditional Shinto funeral – all twenty steps. I wasn’t there, we weren’t close yet, but I met the priest during one of the memorial services Daken invited me to.” She held Logan’s rapt attention; she didn’t dare to look him in the eyes for fear of breaking the spell, but he was listening, and he was touched, and he didn’t know if he could let himself believe, if he could let himself hope that not all was lost. “He has this beautiful little shrine. Your urn has a photo of you, and –” here, she hesitated. It was personal; deeply personal, just as much as her own mother’s funeral. She didn’t think Daken would have wanted any of this to be known by Logan, at all; but she had to get through to their stubborn father, and needs must. “There’s another urn, empty, right next to yours. It has a small hand-made picture of a woman. He told me –”

“Itsu,” Logan said with reverence. “He put me with his momma.” There was wonder in his voice and he lowered his head.

She let go of his hand. She wouldn’t – couldn’t – intrude.

She’d done what she could; she’d tried to make Logan see. Now it was up to him to open his eyes, to be there when they found Daken. To not give up.

She feared what they’d find. A corpse? A mindless vessel? When they managed to save him, to break whatever control Soteira had on his mind, the road to recovery would be steep. Daken would hate himself – for his capture, for being used. He’d berate himself for allowing himself to be used, as if he had a say in the matter… and Laura would be there for him, and Gabby too, and Logan needed to be there as well. To be there for his son. Logan had so many friends, so many people trying to make him heal after Soteira, and Daken – Daken had just them. He had just his family, and they’d close ranks around him.

She’d do anything in her power to protect him. To insure he was granted the same leeway Logan had been given after his return. She was willing to face the whole superhero community, if needed – but Logan’s help would smooth things.

He had to believe in the possibility of Daken’s recovery, because otherwise, things would be much harder than they would certainly already be.

She moved some feet away and discreetly contacted Old Logan and Gabby. The man said they’d almost covered all of Laura and Logan’s ground too, and that they hadn’t found anything. They’d located where Soteira’s jet had probably parked – Daken’s trail ended there – but that was it.

Laura bit the inside of her cheek. So now their only hope for intel were the X-Men and the others already searching for Soteira. They had to get back and lean on Pryde’s good will. If they didn’t have Logan’s support…

She looked at her father. He still hadn’t moved, but she was sure he’d been listening. She made her way back to him. “We need to leave. We’re only wasting time here.”

“Yeah.” Logan nodded and opened his eyes – his gaze was hard, unrelenting, sure.

Her heart leapt to her throat. She’d gotten through to him. He was in, for real this time. He’d help her. He’d help Daken.
“Let’s get back,” he said. “I think I know a way to find some more information.”

Chapter End Notes

Next: Logan seeks help.
Logan seeks help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

5.

“Are you sure about this, Logan?” Rachel asked him.

As if he had any choice. This was the surest he’d ever been in his life: his boy needed him, needed his help; and Logan would do everything in his power to find him, to save him.

It was the least he could do.

Even if it meant to dive into the mess they’d done to his mind. Somewhere, buried deep, there might be answers that would help locate where he’d been kept, and with some luck, that place might not have been abandoned yet. They might find someone to interrogate.

They might even find Daken himself. And then –

Logan would do everything in his power to help him. He had to.

Logan met Rachel’s gaze and nodded. “Yeah. Do it.”

She grimaced. “It might hurt you. They did some complex, layered work, Logan. I’d hoped to pick at it slowly –”

“We don’t have that kind of time,” he interrupted her. He glanced at Laura, who stood still and silent and pale. She’d expressed the very same doubts as Rachel, but she’d finally agreed that this was their best shot.

The mere idea of the kind of damage he could sustain if they were wrong, if they tripped a landmine – he feared what he could become, what he could do. But this was the best way to proceed. He was sure of it. Oh, sure, the others were investigating, working on what little scraps they’d managed to find; but they were on a clock, and if Logan could contribute with something substantial – hell, he’d do it. Even if it meant being permanently brain damaged.

Rachel sighed. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to avoid, Logan.” He heard the sadness in her voice, the sympathy. “I can’t simply barrel in –”

“I’m asking you to.” He turned to face her again. “Rachel, it’s my son. I can’t leave him in their hands. You shouldn’t want that either,” he added desperately, “You’ve seen what I did -”

“What they made you do,” Laura said quietly. He shook his head.

“Regardless.” Now wasn’t the time to make excuses for himself. They had to focus on finding Daken. “They’ll use him for what they were using me for – assassinations, coups maybe.” They still didn’t know Soteira’s ultimate goal, but it couldn’t be good. “We have to find him, and be quick about it.”

Rachel hung her head. “I do agree with you, Logan. I just wish –”
“We don’t want to put unnecessary strain on you.”

Logan turned, even though scent and voice already told him who’d just joined them. Kitty was still phasing the wall, only half of her body visible. Rachel must have called her; Logan didn’t like her going behind his back like this.

“No need to worry, Kitty,” he told the martial woman who had so little in common with the girl he remembered. So many things had changed, and not all of them for the better. “I know what I’m doing.”

Kitty settled where she stood, her arms crossed. “We’re doing what we can, Logan. We’re analyzing the data we have, what Laura gave us. We’re doing everything in our power to find Soteira –”

“And Daken.” Laura spoke quietly, but something in her voice spooked Logan. She wasn’t calm – anything but. Her posture seemed relaxed enough, he supposed, but her gaze was hard as she considered Kitty. Kitty met her gaze unflinchingly.

“Yes,” she conceded. “And Daken. But I see no need to put Logan through that –”

“No, you don’t, do you?” Laura took a step forward, very calmly, and still emanating such an aura that Logan almost felt the physical need to take a step back. But Kitty stood her ground.

They looked like generals about to parley, not teammates. He didn’t like that; but he did wonder at how sure of herself Laura had become.

She picked her words with care, speaking slowly but surely. “Unnecessary strain, you said. I can’t shake off the feeling you see my brother as disposable. That’s not how it is, is it, Pryde?” She held her chin high.

Kitty grimaced as if Laura hadn’t hit that far off the mark. This alarmed him. He couldn’t take that: his son needed help. He’d thought his people, his friends, would help him find him, but now Rachel refused to, and Kitty vetoed it – and he didn’t like how that made him feel. A stranger in his own home, navigating hierarchies he knew nothing about.

He should just leave and look for Daken on his own, but he knew he needed help. He couldn’t do it alone, not this time. Not with no intel to begin with.

“Kitty,” he began. She still hadn’t said a word, and he hoped to win her over. “Let me do this. I could remember something substantial, important. And time –”

“- is of the essence, yes.” Kitty briefly shut her eyes. “People could be dying as we speak, I know. But I don’t fancy losing you again over this, Logan. You heard Rachel. It could damage –”

“That is my choice.” He clenched his jaw. Let him do something, for crying out loud. Let him be of use, let him help his son, instead of cowering in a corner, safe and pampered, when Daken was going through what he’d gone through!

“And we, as your friends, are telling you that’s a bad idea,” Kitty said firmly. “You need to rest,” she added softly, almost as an afterthought. “Heal. Let Rachel help you with that. We’ve got this.” She eyed Laura. “And you know better than this, Laura. You’re too involved to think straight –”

Now Laura did look murderous, her eyes flashing in a way he’d often seen with Daken. She was rubbing off on him, maybe? Logan could only hope the reverse was true as well.

“This is my father and brother we’re talking about,” she said, no trace of her obvious turmoil in her
voice. It shook Logan to hear her speak like that – to hear her pronounce their ties so clearly, with pride. To hear her name him her father, name Daken her brother. She’d carved a family for herself; she’d grown. He loved her so. “Of course I’m involved,” Laura threw a glance at him, “of course I’m worried this could damage Logan. Do you know what else I’m worried about?” She didn’t let Kitty answer; she barreled in, voicing the fear she’d already managed to pass on to Logan through her wording, her confrontationality. The thought he didn’t want to face but was forced to acknowledge at seeing the hard lines of Kitty’s face. “I’m worried you’ll find Daken, and deem the damage too grave. I’m worried you’ll only see a threat and act accordingly and call it mercy. Say I’m wrong, Pryde.” She paused. “Say it, and I’d probably still not believe you.”

Kitty pursed her lips. “We’ll help him, obviously. If we find him, we’ll –”

“Will you?” Laura cocked her head. “I find that hard to believe. I find it hard to believe you’ll grant him the same leniency you’ve granted Logan, me, countless others. You think he’s irredeemable, and you won’t waste resources on him. You won’t risk losing Logan over this,” she quoted Kitty, emphasizing the last two words.

“Logan is my friend,” Kitty countered. “Our friend. And your brother, Laura, isn’t some innocent little thing –”

“He’s not a thing,” Logan found himself growling. He didn’t like where this was going. He didn’t like it one bit. Hell, no one better than him knew how dangerous Daken was – all the things he’d done. But Kitty was being recklessly callous, and this was his son she was talking about – his son she was refusing to help.

Her gaze softened as she looked back at him. “No, of course not. None of you are. But Daken –”

“I assure you,” Laura interrupted her, “we’re both well aware of by brother’s shortcomings. Are you aware of his accomplishments? Of how hard he’s been working…” She trailed off, shook her head. “This is beside the point.”

Kitty sighed. She passed a hand over her eyes. “Laura, I… I know he’s helped you. And I know he’s helped against Mothervine. You want to believe the best of him, I understand that. He’s your brother and it’s natural you care for him –”

“I said that’s beside the point.” Laura’s gaze hardened further. “This is a mutant, Pryde. A mutant who has been kidnapped and will be used against his will – and you, as leader of the X-Men, should be against that.”

“Of course I’m against that –” Kitty exploded, exasperated.

“Not to mention,” Laura kept on, “This mutant will be forced to kill people. Innocent citizens. You should worry about that too.”

“Laura, I’m aware of all this,” Kitty said forcefully. Laura trailed off, allowing her to speak. “And I said we are working on it. We’ll find him, and do everything in our power to collect him. We will help him, I promise.” She tried to look reassuring, but Laura wasn’t having it.

“And yet,” Laura said softly, “you won’t let us contain the damage. The sooner we find him, the lesser will have be done to him and by him. You know that. And if Logan were to remember something important –”

Kitty clenched her jaw. “I can’t, in good conscience, let Logan hurt himself over this. That’s final.”

She spoke as if she believed he’d just stay put and do as she said. He’d have followed her gladly in
any other thing, and he ached to see her in action, as a leader; but he had no intention to play by her rules in this. There were always other telepaths –

But one of them was still in the room, with them. Although she hadn’t said a word ever since Kitty’s arrival, Rachel hadn’t left; and she must have heard his thoughts. Would she denounce him to Kitty?

Sure enough, he heard her inhale to speak. He exchanged a glance with Laura and she nodded; she wouldn’t be deterred by anything they said. They’d have to restrain the both of them to stop them.

“Kitty,” Rachel said slowly, hesitantly, and Logan rejoiced, because that didn’t sound like her wanting to back Kitty up.

Had they managed to sway her?

Kitty’s gaze went past him to the telepath. She was grimacing; she’d heard that too. “What?”

“They’re right.” Rachel sighed. “It’s irresponsible not to pursue every trail available. If there’s even a slim chance that Logan can lead to Soteira quicker, we should take it. We can’t let one of us in such hands any longer.”

“One of us.” Logan’s heart swelled. To hear Daken dubbed so by a friend was different than hearing it from Laura. She was family; she had no choice but to love him. Rachel didn’t have such an obligation, especially in the wake of what Daken must have done in Logan’s absence – he was gleaning things, here and there; Daken must have been active. He’d helped with some things, according to Kitty, but her words spoke of an animosity that couldn’t merely date back to the damage he’d done while Logan was still alive; so many years had passed. He must have done something else, if Kitty thought he was irredeemable.

So to hear Rachel count Daken among her people, their people, reassured Logan more than what Laura had already managed to.

Kitty pinched the bridge of her nose. “You said it might damage Logan.”

“Yes. If I’m on my own.” Rachel took a few steps to join them. “But a concerted action could prevent that. If I coordinate with others, if we tread carefully –” she cocked her head. “I’m positive we could do that without any lingering damage in Logan’s brain.” She smiled gently at him. “We’re positive.”

He couldn’t suppress a shiver. He had a feeling he knew who she meant – and he wasn’t sure he was ready to face that.

But for his son, he must.

“We. You’re in contact already?” Kitty sighed; there was fondness in her voice. “Why did you even bother to call me in?” Then her gaze hardened. “Are you sure he’ll be safe?”

Rachel nodded, her expression equally serious. “We’ll do out damnedest best.”

“All right. I trust you, Ray.” Kitty still didn’t sound convinced – but she’d apparently concede. He was glad of that. He’d been ready to estrange her, but he’d have done so begrudgingly.

There was, for a moment, something incredibly soft in Rachel’s eyes as she nodded at Kitty again, but he blinked and it was gone. Then the woman was before him, clasping his hand. “Let’s go, Logan.” And she started leading him away. Laura fell into step immediately and they left Kitty there.
“Where are we going?” Laura asked. She furrowed her brow as she fished her phone from her pocket. “I’m going to text Gabby the news.” The girl was with his old counterpart, as Laura hadn’t wanted her to witness what could turn out to be right unpleasant.

“Betsy’s room,” Rachel threw over her shoulder. He steered to a halt and Laura did the same. He’d seen Betsy; he’d managed not to do a double take only because he’d been warned about what had happened to her whilst searching for him. She hadn’t seemed to be in top form, and he couldn’t blame her; would she be up to the task?

Not to mention she had fought Daken together with Logan. She’d seen Daken at his worst. Could they really trust her with his son’s fate? Logan trusted her with his own life, of course, but could he take such a chance?

Rachel seemed to get his conundrum. “She needs something to do, Logan, just as much as you. And you know she doesn’t strike unless given good reason,” she added quietly.

Yeah, he knew that. She had a strong moral code. He was ashamed of thinking so lowly of her, even if for a moment.

Laura’s hand brushed against his arm. “She’s right,” she said serenely. “We can trust her.” There was a waver in her voice – he’d told her what had happened with Daken at the time, so she must have shared his same concerns now – but she sounded ultimately convinced.

They resumed their walking.

“I doubt it’s going to be just Braddock,” Laura said after a while. “Have you enlisted your mother?” Again, Logan couldn’t prevent the shiver running through his spine. He recalled stabbing an empty shell at the North Pole, over and over and over again. If he focused, he could still feel the blood on his hands, the hate on her face.

Not her face.

“Yeah,” Rachel murmured. “She teleported in.” She threw Logan a undecipherable glance. “If you need a moment –”

“My son doesn’t have a moment.” He soldiered on; he had to. The ensuing silence was difficult to break; Laura squeezed his shoulder. They navigated the corridors until, finally, he could smell Betsy. Not just her.

He smelt Betsy, and – he was hit by nostalgia – Kurt, who must have teleported her, and he smelt… her. Her scent. Jean. God, that shell’s mocking laughter still echoed in his ears.

Rachel opened the door and there they were: his elf, and Betsy, and Jean. God, she hadn’t aged a day.

She looked up when they arrived – she was crouched beside Betsy’s chair as the woman stared into the fireplace, face hidden by lavender hair – and her smile was just as kind as he remembered, before the Phoenix marred that memory.

“Logan,” she said softly as she stood up. “Let’s find your son.”

Chapter End Notes
Next: A trip inside Logan’s mind.

[This was my first time writing Kitty! Let me know if she sounded OOC. I'm not a fan of her current characterization, but I'm trying to stick to canon, where it's possible. I'm not going to follow the most recent issues, though.]
A trip inside Logan's mind.

Chapter Notes

Additional warnings: filicide, mentions of suicidal behavior, upsetting imagery.

This one’s a bit morbid. I hope I don’t scare any of you off. Do tell me what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

6.

It was like walking uninvited into some private part of her father’s life.

The air in the room was thick with strange, heavy connotations – eerie electricity running between him and Jean, him and Kurt.

She couldn’t say she knew them well. She worked well with the both of them, yes; she respected them both. But she didn’t know them. Now, obviously that was due to the fact that death had taken them both for quite some time; not to mention Jean had died quite shortly after Laura’s arrival at the school.

She’d been a scared child at the time; she recalled Jean’s death hitting Logan hard, but little more than that, for at the time he was still so guarded around her, and she around him. She did recall Kurt comforting Logan, their friendship that had always struck her as more; but then Kurt had died, too. By that time, she was a little less guarded, and could look at the teleporter with what she’d feared to call affection – but still, she couldn’t say she knew him, not really. His death had touched her, of course, but at the time she still felt she had no right to that. She’d watched his friends mourn him instead – Ororo and Logan the most subdued in such grieving time.

She’d been glad when he’d been revived, because she’d seen the effect that had on Logan. But even then, she hadn’t approached him. And after, with Logan’s death, she’d sought to distance herself from everyone who’d loved him, her own pain too fresh to share. It had taken her kidnapping, Daken’s presence, to finally learn that. They’d mourned fitfully as they learned their way around each other, bound by pain just as much as by the blooming affection born in the wake of mutual respect –

And that brought her here. Here to this room, trying to find a way to return Daken home – side by side with teammates she now thought she’d never really know.

Both Jean and Kurt had greeted her with a fleeting smile, but now their attention, as it should be, was focused on their old friend. And there was a nervous energy there, something she couldn’t quite put her finger on. She thought she recognized the love in the two men’s eyes – the same shared by Logan and Ororo, tinged by the same timid wariness she’d witnessed around them ever since his return; and that, out of the kinship and gratitude she felt for the wind-rider, was what sent her teeth on edge upon looking at Jean.

Because while the woman wasn’t acting like anything but a close friend, happy to see Logan back
from the dead, there was still something in her eyes. It didn’t speak of anything recent, but it seemed like regret.

And yet, none of this was Laura’s business.

She let them catch up, even though they were hardly talking – resolving to intervene only if the reunion began to take too long, for, even as she knew Logan felt the same urgency regarding Daken’s predicament, it was clear he was lost in the past for now – and joined Braddock and Rachel.

Rachel had taken her mother’s side at the feet of Braddock’s chair; and Laura sat opposite them, though she kept her silence. The two women must be deep in telepathic conversation.

It had surprised her to see Braddock upon her return from the Madripoor mission; she’d known some vague detail about how the woman had come to wear her body, but she hadn’t ever stopped to think about what that could do to her identity. And now – seeing her inhabit again, but with clear unease, her original Caucasian body – Laura wondered in what other ways such a thing had marked her. It couldn’t be easy to find herself back in shoes she’d thought long gone, perhaps lost forever.

No wonder she spent her days holed up in this room; and no wonder she felt the need to do something to shake off the apathy. Laura asked herself how much of that decision was her choice and how much of it was just Rachel prodding at her until she consented to help; but then she was struck by the fact such thoughts were terribly rude as she entertained them so near to the telepaths in question, and so she returned her attention to Logan and his old – friends? Paramours?

Rachel’s choked snort confirmed that at least some of her thoughts had been heard, so Laura climbed to her feet once more. Braddock merely hummed.

“We can’t waste any more time,” Laura said apologetically. Logan winced.

“Yeah, you’re right.” He run his gaze from telepath to telepath, his expression turning resolute. “How will we do this?”

“First off, you need to lie down.” With a wide gesture, Rachel motioned to the bed in the room. With the other hand she squeezed Braddock’s leg. “You ready, love?”

Braddock finally raised her head. Her eyes looked wild, very much alive with excitement at the upcoming task. Laura crossed her arms. She wasn’t so sure it was a good idea to make her go from inactivity to something so delicate in one go, but she wasn’t an expert. If neither Rachel nor Jean were worried, she shouldn’t either.

She watched in silence as the powerful trio of telepaths closed in on Logan, and she couldn’t suppress a shiver, recalling her own recent run-in with the Cuckoos. She was glad Gabby wasn’t here; she acted as if the possession hadn’t affected her, but she was different these days – morose, more prone to emotional outbursts. So frail.

If they lost Daken, Gabby would never recover.

She watched as Logan lay down and the telepaths sat in formation around him, Jean the closest to his head; the woman reached out gently, placed both hands on his temples, and closed her eyes.

For a while there was silence, punctuated by their breaths. Rachel and Braddock had closed their eyes as well, and Logan’s were squinted shut, and Laura met Kurt’s worried gaze. He half-shrugged.

“Should we –” He jerked his head towards the door. He probably didn’t want to disturb them, but Laura had no intention to leave; she needed to see this through.

She was already in motion, alerted by the sound. She lingered by the bed, waiting for further instruction. Logan was pale; his skin beaded with sweat. She hesitated. If he was so affected by mere minutes of this, perhaps Pryde was right. Perhaps they should wait without exerting him – he’d just come back, and he had much to work through, and here he was, harming himself, and she’d made him do so. She’d as good as guilt-tripped him into doing it.

But Daken needed help. He needed to be found.

How could she protect one while harming the other?

“You aren’t.” Braddock’s voice was closer than she’d expected. The woman cocked her head. “Sit beside him, on the bed. Take his hands. You’ll be our anchor.”

“Blood is strong,” Rachel added. “And he chose you.”

Jean just hummed.

Laura did as she was told, tucking her legs under her and grabbing both of Logan’s clammy hands. He exhaled as she did so.

“Good.” Jean leaned in, a crease of concentration on her forehead, her fiery locks brushing Logan’s face. “We’re going to pull you in, Laura. All right?”

A small part of her panicked. So close to telepaths in action, she could still feel Sophie’s whispers at the back of her mind, as if called forth by them. It was merely a ghost, and the poor girl had helped in the end; nonetheless, it made her skin crawl.

But this moment couldn’t be about her. “Yes.”

“I’m going to tell Ororo,” Kurt said quietly from his spot.

“Yes, thank you.” Rachel moved closer as Braddock did the same, the four of them a barrier between Logan and the world. Kurt stole one last glance between Jean’s and Braddock’s shoulders and then left, closing the door behind him. She heard him teleport away from there.

“Here we are, Laura.” She felt the soft touch of Jean’s mind, felt herself drawn and guided through blazing light. The room vanished and she found herself in a dark wooden house; the simplicity of the furniture and the cut of the wood made her think it was a Japanese abode.

The stench of blood assaulted her nostrils. She turned, ready to strike; the three telepaths stood in a semi-circle around something – someone. Two people; there was a corpse on the floor, and a shaking figure sat by the body.

Coming closer, Laura got a good look at the dead woman. Her face struck her, for she’d seen it already, although her expression had been kind and serene, lovingly rendered by a hand that had only someone else’s memory to go by.

“That’s Itsu,” she murmured. She looked up and met Jean’s gaze. “Daken’s mother.” Logan let out a cry.

Yes. Jean’s lips didn’t move. Use your mind to talk with us, Laura. He can’t see us for now.

Why? What’s happening? Laura returned her attention to Logan’s weeping figure.
This scene represents his guilt, his desire to find his son. Logan was – she didn’t know how she hadn’t noticed before; it made her skin crawl – Logan had buried his arms, elbows deep, in the dead woman’s belly, and he was feeling around for something that wasn’t there anymore. Talk to him, Laura, Rachel nudged her. We need him alert.

Laura went to a crouch. She could hear Logan’s frantic, desperate whispering, “Where is he, where is he, where is he –” and it squeezed her heart. She touched gently his arm.

“Logan, he’s not here.” Logan jerked, but kept on with his futile attempts. She shook him, once. “He’s gone. But we’ll find him, Logan. With your help.”

“My help?” Logan looked up, eyes red and puffy and unfocused, tears streaming his face. “All I’ve ever done is give up on him.” The scene shifted to a desolate pile of rubble. He was holding someone down – Daken. He was holding Daken down.

Laura knew about this. She’d been told about it – by Logan, with a dead voice. By Daken himself, with much the same tone.

Nothing had prepared her for the grim reality of it: the desperation, the helplessness. Daken’s body wanted to live even if he didn’t anymore, and he’d struggled – oh God, was he struggling – but Logan’s grip was steel and unforgiveness and horrified resolution.

This would bring them nowhere. This would only further Logan’s self-flagellation and wouldn’t benefit Daken. She knew Logan needed to work on his feelings about that day – about his whole relationship with Daken – but now wasn’t the time.

She placed a hand on Logan’s, strands of Daken’s damp hair brushing against her fingertips. She could hear her brother’s wet cries – the water filling his lungs, the mud muffling his gasps. He was clutching wildly at the dirt to gain some purchase, his knuckles white, but he was too weak already. She felt a fierce, furious instinct to battle Logan, to stop him – but it would be pointless. It had already happened. “Logan. It’s done. You can’t do anything about it – but you can fix the rest. You can help him. You can find him.”

“Find him?” The desperation in Logan’s eyes gave way to alertness. He looked at her as Daken finally stilled. She hoped her features didn’t show how the sudden absence of the sounds affected her – what the sight of her brother’s corpse was doing to her.

“Yes, find him. Come with us, Logan.”

Confused, he looked up – to find himself staring at the trio of telepaths. Their expressions were kind, but the pity in their eyes unmistakable. Logan hung his head in shame.

“I –”

“Snap out of it, Logan,” Braddock said. “Get up. We don’t have much time, remember?”

“But I need to bury him –” he said weakly. Laura shook him, finally fed up – she didn’t know what hurt the most: the defeated voice, his shifting eyes… he’d sported the same signs when he’d told her, so long ago. And even if she’d understood it must have been a practical choice that would have haunted him forever, even at the time she’d felt a drop of uneasiness.

It was Braddock who struck him, though.

“If you don’t want to bury him again, Logan,” the woman said harshly, crouching opposite Logan, “you’ll get up now.” Logan tried to avoid her gaze, found the only thing he could fix his eyes on was
Daken’s corpse, and looked back up with a grimace. “You did what you thought was best in that moment,” Braddock continued, not unkindly. “Accept it, let it go, and thank God you have a second chance now.” She cocked her head. “I can’t tell you that it’s all going to solve. But you can try, Logan. You can work for it.”

“Don’t you want to talk with him?” Laura added. “To apologize. To work everything out.” It wouldn’t certainly take one single conversation, but she hoped it was the incentive Logan needed.

He nodded, his cheeks wet with tears.

“Then get up,” Braddock urged. “Get up now.” She held out a hand; after a long moment, Logan took it.

The scene vanished. It was a relief; if she had to look down at her brother’s corpse for much longer, she feared she wouldn’t answer for her actions.

There was a lull; Logan stood awkwardly, doing his best to avoid everyone’s eyes, fists balled so hard that, if they’d been back in the real world, he’d have drawn his own blood with his nails.

“It’s all right, Logan. It’s going to be all right.” Jean lay a comforting hand on his arm. Logan winced and she attempted a smile, hoping, perhaps, to comfort him – but how could one go on about comforting someone who wasn’t in the right mind to accept such a thing? Logan was drowning with guilt. “Are you ready?” Jean eventually said.

His mouth a thin white line, Logan nodded. Jean squeezed his arm, then let her hand fall to her side.

_We’re going to bring you back to the bunker where we find you_, Rachel said. _All right?_

Once again, Logan nodded, grim acceptance on his face. He was ready. As ready as he could be, anyway.

So they dove deeper.

Chapter End Notes

_Next: Recovering intel unearths an unpleasant truth._

[Whew, I haven’t written this cast in ages! And I *think* I’ve never written Jean. Let me know if you find something clunky.

About Jean: this isn’t going to become some strange love quadrangle, don’t worry. When I was younger I fell for the forbidden Logan/Jean romance, but those two just don’t work. No, I have something else in mind for her – let’s just see if I can work it in. Perhaps you’ll see it in the background; the snikt family’s the focus, after all. Speaking of which: Daken’s coming soon, I promise.]
Recovering intel unearths an unpleasant truth.

Chapter Notes

No particular warnings this time – except for those in the tags, of course. Do tell me if something is missing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

7.

It was dark and small and it smelled unpleasantly. He couldn’t get out – his claws didn’t work, maybe the walls were made of adamantium? – and he didn’t know where he was. He’d thought he was buried alive in the encasing, on that damn roof, forever aware until he suffocated and then came back to life again, but that didn’t make sense, because his healing factor was gone; that was why he’d died. And yet, his wounds had closed when he’d retracted his claws after trying to graze his prison –

It was strange – and it infuriated her so – to experience such thoughts and feelings as her own; to know so intimately what suffocating horrors Logan had been subjected to.

So, this confirms you were aware before we arrived. That was Braddock’s voice; Laura tried to orient herself towards it. Can you remember how you got there? Braddock sounded like she was grimacing. They’d suspected that he’d awakened long before being found, of course: after all, he was already awake when Pryde had entered the bunker, and when she’d phased him out of there Logan had looked alert, seemingly recognizing them all. He’d looked at Laura with such wonder in his eyes; he was leaning on Colossus’ arm, and his feverish gaze had zeroed in on her immediately.

Then he’d passed out.

I don’t really remember… I just came to in there. Logan sounded unsure.

That’s what we’re here for. Jean reached out; even Laura could feel it. Laura, hold him. Logan, think about that name – Soteira. Yes, that’s it – focus on that. On how it makes you feel.

Nausea and panic, bile in her throat. Cold sweat on her forehead.

Laura, hold him steady.

It felt like forever. They picked at things she couldn’t see, couldn’t hear. Phantom fingers in her brain – in Logan’s brain – she was holding him together. She was the anchor, his blood, his daughter, and she’d hold him upright until the telepaths found a way in.

But they were trapped in a slick darkness – a sense of helplessness, foreboding and cruel. She tasted blood in her mouth from how hard he/she was biting his/her tongue. Words echoed in his/her ears. She couldn’t even recognize which of the telepaths was saying what.

– not telepathy. This is all scientific –
– like with Weapon X, there was –

– his brain, healing the trauma. Maybe –

– yes. Try –

Got it!

It unraveled like a nightmare giving way to an even worse dream, flooding them all with scents and sounds and stark images. He stood in a cell – unmoving, like a puppet waiting for his strings to be pulled, eyes staring ahead. He was killing people – men and women and children alike, always with the same stony expression. He cried out at seeing himself stick his claws into innocent people, at seeing the cold machine they’d turned him back into – a weapon for their pleasure, only willing to serve. The bile rushing up Laura’s throat was hers just as much as she felt Logan’s; she knew that feeling intimately. She knew about being used, about being forced to do what was bid. She even knew the horrifying feeling of not being in charge of her own body, of waking up to discover it had been used as was seen fit. She held Logan through the vision, the both of them protected by the telepaths who acted as shields as they looked for information in the cacophony.

Focus on names, Logan! Locations! Let your mind catch up. We’ll follow the trail, but we need you to point us towards it!

Logan closed his eyes, a crease of concentration on his forehead. Laura rested her own to his, hoping it would lend him strength.

Where were they keeping you? Did you ever see the outside? When they sent you on missions, perhaps?

A flash of something white. A constriction in her lungs.

Okay, a mountain area. Obviously. That’s good, Logan! Keep trying!

Night. One time it was night – as he was herded towards the helicopter, one of the soldiers holding his arm slipped, pulling him forward, and he looked up.

Are we getting this? The sky’s so clear, look at the stars! We all need to memorize it, okay? Keep it firmly in your mind!

Laura did the same, staring with helpless hope at the constellations. It was a clear night, devoid of clouds, and each luminous point was a stab wound in the bodies of the people who’d taken Logan, who had Daken.

The scene dulled suddenly, as if banished. She fought to hold on to the stars, but they were twirling away, and they were the only thing, the only way back to Daken –

“- here.”

She spun around. They were back in the cell, Logan still and unmoving, only his eyes alert with his present mind as he seemed to completely inhabit the memory; someone was speaking outside. But they had to get back – they had to get back to the mountain, see the night sky –

It’s all right, Laura. We have the image. She couldn’t see the telepaths anymore, but she heard them all the same.

Yes, but what happened? Braddock asked.
She influenced the reception, Jean said, matter-of-factly. She called Daken forth in Logan’s mind.

You mean –

Yes, I fear so.

We should leave. Before –

Too late.

Laura stared helplessly as the door was opened. She memorized every line on the face of the man standing in the doorway, for she knew she couldn’t do anything to him now. But the next time she saw him, back in the real world, she’d have words with him, and more than that. She’d have his life.

He wore a two-piece, his hair primly cut short. He had the malevolent eyes of a man accustomed to have others do his dirty work.

“Get out, Wolverine. Stand by the door.”

Logan’s body came to life. He moved efficiently and she followed; but while he didn’t stop at seeing what was outside, oblivious to it – though his eyes, mirroring his present consciousness, were wide with agony – she stopped dead in her tracks, confronted by an ugly, obvious truth:

Of course they’d moved Logan only once Daken was secured.

He lay on a gurney, his hair fanned out. He looked peaceful. She held out a hand, knowing fully well she couldn’t touch him, but aching to all the same. His skin was so pale; there were patches of dried blood here and there. It seemed he’d healed fully. Was he already alive? Had he woken up already, only to be put under again?

No, he wouldn’t have seemed so at peace if that had been the case.

They put him in the room, then other people followed suit, with cables and machinery and helmets; but she couldn’t see what they did with any of it, as the man moved away and ordered Logan to follow.

Logan seemed to be effectively trapped in the memory, screaming from his eyes. He’d been so close. So close! If only he’d snapped out of it, if only he’d been able to overcome whatever they’d done to his brain, he could have saved his son –

And then you would have been trapped there, Braddock said sensibly. With no possible means to contact anyone, surrounded by enemies. I know you’ve faced worst threats, but let’s look at the odds here, Logan. You wouldn’t have saved him. Perhaps they’d have kept you too.

He should have tried!

Logan, listen to me. There was nothing you could have done!

He shouldn’t have abandoned his son again!

Logan wasn’t listening. He was howling in anguish – lost in the moment, forced to follow the memory even as he struggled to come back to the corridor, to Daken’s side. To see more of him, perhaps, to marinate in despair as he did so.

She understood that feeling. God, it couldn’t be easy to realize he’d been right there as Daken was brought in; to bemoan himself for not being able to snap out of the brainwashing in order to save his
son.

But this wasn’t his fault; he had no possible way to fight what had been done to him. She knew – she didn’t know where her certainty came from, but she guessed the three telepaths’ knowledge was bleeding through – that his brain had been turned into a convoluted maze, probably through strange chemicals; his healing factor had been no match for it, perhaps impeded by a version of the device that Deathstrike had described. He’d had no chance to fight it.

But this was a lucid analysis he couldn’t make, at least for now. For now he was overcome with grief, this truth only adding to the stockpile of his wrongdoings.

She heard the telepaths – she felt them, too, their frantic, concerted movements – but none of what they said would reach Logan. And they had other things to worry about – she felt, too, at the back of Logan’s mind, the presence of that strange maze, which the telepaths were battling. She was alone here.

It was up to her. She was the anchor, his blood, his daughter, and it was up to her to pick up the pieces. To snap him out of it and mend her family.

Logan. She held him tightly. He kept walking after the man, trapped in the memory, but his eyes were ablaze – feverish. It happened. It’s terrible, it’s unfair, but it happened, and there’s nothing you can do about it. Now you can only move forward. Find him again. Save him.

Save him. Logan blinked, something rational back in his gaze. She plunged on.

Yes, save him. You can, Logan. We can. We have something – we may find him soon. And he’ll need you. He’ll need his father, Logan.

I –

Be there, she pressed. You’ll need to be there. For him, for you. To heal.

Heal? He shook his head – not in denial, but confusion. Laura, we can’t–

Yes, you can. You can heal each other. We’ll help. We’ll all help, father. We –

Father? She could feel the shock rippling through him as well as through herself. She’d named him so in his presence already, but this was the first time she called him by that word.

She hadn’t even told him yet.

Yes. We’re a family, Logan. We’re here for each other. That’s what families do.

The howling subsided; that feverish light in his eyes vanished. She held him through it – they were made of iron, and they’d weather this storm. They’d come out of it whole.

She was sure of it.

She had to be.

Eventually she saw there were two Logans again. She was holding her father, while the brainwashed memory kept following his jailor.

Jean materialized beside them. She looked positively ruffled, her long hair wild; a manifestation of their struggle against whatever Soteira had done to Logan’s brain, perhaps. Laura was glad she hadn’t had to face that; the battle here had been difficult enough.
And you did well. Jean smiled. We should leave. We have much to do.

Logan followed his memory-self with his gaze. Not all of his questions had been answered, but it would have to do for now. They had information to check – and, hopefully, a rescue mission to plan.

Yeah, let's go. He squeezed Laura’s hand –

– and they were back in the room. There was a gasp as she stirred, her muscles aching; then something – someone – flung herself at her.

“You’ve been gone forever!”

Gabby. Laura held her in return while trying to keep her balance on the bed; her sister was shaking slightly, and smelt thoroughly upset.

They weren’t alone; the room felt overcrowded. The three telepaths were wincing as they attempted to get up, and Laura felt stiff as well. Logan was sitting up, searching someone with his gaze – alerted by their scent. There was a beat, and then both Ororo and Kurt were by the bed, each of them taking one of Logan’s hands.

“Hey, 'Ro,” he said quietly. “Elf.”

They didn’t speak. Ororo pressed the back of his hand to her cheek; Kurt kept staring down at him, apparently at a loss for words. Laura stood up, dragging Gabby with her, to give them space. She had to lean against the wall; she felt a bit light-headed.

“How long?” she asked her sister while caressing her hair.

“Hours and hours,” Gabby muttered. “Almost a day!”

Taken aback, Laura looked up to meet Rachel’s gaze. The telepath nodded; Laura hadn’t realized so much time had passed, but then again, she and Logan had been shielded by the powerful trio.

It must have been an ordeal, if Braddock’s grimace was anything to go by. Jean looked unfazed, but she couldn’t fool Laura, who’d seen her out of sorts just a while earlier.

“Did it work?” Pryde’s voice brought her back to the present. The woman stood by the door, and there were people peering in as well – Jubilee was among them, her attention divided between Laura and Logan: she was eyeing worriedly the both of them.

“We have something, yes,” Jean said. “A sky map. With a bit of luck, they might even still be there – and Daken with them.”

Pryde nodded stiffly. “Follow me. And you,” she added as Logan made to stand up, “Stay here. Rest. That’s an order. Unless that’s a problem, Betsy? We could move him –” She trailed off, unsure, but Braddock shook her head.

“No problem at all. Stay as long as you want,” she said as she and Rachel moved to join Pryde and Jean. “He needs to lie down for a while,” she added to Ororo and Kurt. “Tie him up, if you must.”

“Oh, we will,” Ororo said softly. She sat down, and Kurt walked around the bed to do the same on the other side.

“I need –” Logan tried to protest, but he was gently shushed by the man.

“You need to lie down, you heard her. I’m sure they’ll come tell us if there’s news, ja?”
Logan looked subdued; he must be exhausted not to put up more of a fight.

And he should be. They’d rummaged through his brain, and he’d been dealt a terrible blow; he should just leave the rest to them now.

She put a hand on Gabby’s shoulder, so that her sister would release her. She needed to follow the others, and make sure to add her own memories of the sky map; she needed to be there while they planned –

“You too, Laura,” Rachel said. Laura looked up at her sharply; the woman had the same stern expression Braddock had sported with Logan. “You need to rest.”

There was no way in hell she’d do that while they discussed the fate of her brother. She tried to take a step in their direction, but Gabby had decided to become an unmoving object, her arms tight around her.

“I’ll tie her up!” came her muffled voice, from somewhere around Laura’s stomach.

Her throat tightened. “Gabby –”

“Nu-huh!” Gabby shook her head and held her tighter. And as she was squeezed to death by her suddenly overbearing sister, Pryde took the cowardly way out and led the telepaths away; only Jean had the good grace to look ashamed of it, but still she said nothing.

“Gabby.” She got Gabby’s worry, she really did; but this was Daken they were talking about. Their brother. She had to make sure they really had the intel, she had to follow the proceedings, know everything they decided and steer the conversation if she heard something she didn’t like. “Gabby, let me go.” As always, her sister was immune to stern words, and just kept shaking her head.

“Gabby.”

“All right, show’s over,” Jubilee cheerfully said from the doorway. She was shooing away friends and students alike. “Let them rest, people!” When the hallway was cleared, she hovered by the door and threw Laura a smile. “So I’m thinking, you can come to my room? So you can rest, and he can rest,” she pointed at Logan, arching her eyebrows in a suggestive, playful manner. Ororo regally ignored her, while Kurt smiled. “And everyone’s happy. What do you think?”

“I need to join the others,” she said sternly. Jubilee’s gaze softened.

“They’ll call you immediately if there something to be done,” she said. “You know that, right? They won’t just leave you here. We know it’s important. But you need to lie down at least a little, okay? Don’t make me bedazzle you,” she stage-whispered, wiggling her hands.

Her levity always brought a smile to Laura’s face.

Not this time, though. She couldn’t sit still while her brother was in danger.

A shadow passed over Jubilee’s face. “Don’t go all Wolvie on me.” At Laura’s perplexed expression – even if she could guess what Jubilee meant – she elaborated: “Don’t get so stoic and mopey. We’re here to help, Laura. We’re a family.”

A family.

She felt Logan’s eyes on her and there he was, half a tired smile on his face – as if to scold her for forgetting what she’d told him to encourage him, what she’d learnt while he was gone. He was reluctantly embracing such truth, and his gaze seemed to tell her to get onboard without making a
Perhaps they were right. Perhaps she could trust Pryde and the others. They’d help find Daken, and she could hand over the reins for a while.

Just a little while.

She had to be well rested for when it was time to rescue Daken, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Next: the asset fights.

[Yes, next chapter Daken returns ^-^ I hope it will be worth the wait!
Today Jubilee showed up! It will be interesting for me to write her, I’ve only ever written her with the future characterization we saw in Battle of the Atom. I’d love to hear from you all! Let me know what you think, it helps me grow as a writer. If you’re shy, come and leave me a message at my tumblr (gealach-in-a-misty-world.tumblr.com), I’ll answer privately ^-^ ]
The asset fights.

Chapter Notes

Additional warnings: non-linear narrative, suicidal thoughts and actions, past conditioning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

8.

He came to. He was.

He stood. People were shouting. Alarms blaring. One of his masters was in front of him. He had to follow his master immediately. Why hadn’t they listened? Dammit. Come, come, quickly! We need to leave!

He followed his master. His master walked fast and he followed at the same pace. They were protected by cannon fodder around them. There were alarms blaring. Sound of fighting all over the compound. He could be of better use if his masters sicced him on their foes, but his masters knew better, of course.

They entered a tunnel. Closed a heavy door behind them. The sounds came muffled, then vanished. They were getting away from the fight. His master was protecting the asset; he would take good care of him and make contact with his other masters when this died down. Dammit, they should have relocated as soon as they had him. But this was the only facility big enough to house the training grounds – no matter, no matter, the killteams would take care of this…

His master was rambling, his voice was echoing in the small space. The cannon fodders’ stamping boots added to the noise. But the asset had hyper-senses. He spoke up, even if he hadn’t been given permission to speak. He was a good boy, after all. Good boys don’t let their masters get hurt, even if disobeying brings pain. “There’s someone ahead, master.” There were people at the end of the tunnel. Some people were coming in. “Incoming. Three people. Likely mutants.” He sniffed. It was difficult from this distance, but mutants had a specific under-current to their scent. “Confirmed. Three mutants.”

His master cursed. He sent some cannon fodder ahead and paced in a circle, muttering to himself, as the rest went in formation around the two of them. His master was trying to decide if they should get back to the compound or force their way ahead. Only three mutants? They could make it! But what if others were waiting outside? And yet, the compound by now bust be swarmed with mutants! Going forward was the only way possible –

The asset stood still, waiting for instructions. He could easily dispose of the intruders, but his masters knew best. They still hadn’t sent him on mission, after all; perhaps they thought him defective. Perhaps he was.

He wanted to prove himself, but he’d have to wait for an order. Unless his master was in danger. Then he’d move. He’d certainly be punished, but that would mean his master was alive to do so.
The asset’s heart skipped a beat, but then resumed beating normally. He focused on his surroundings.

There was fighting ahead. Grunts. Screams. Sounds of bodies hitting the floor. Guns firing. Something wet and cold and –

-he hated cold-

- coming. Coming towards them. The asset put himself in front of his master – was that his defect? Strange thoughts in his head? – and prepared to fight. The temperature was dropping.

-he hated cold!-

“Master,” he said. “They’re coming. I’ll protect you, master.” If it was the last thing he did. He was a good boy.

[Laughter in his ears.]

He was crazy. Defective.

His master cursed. They were done, he said. Oh, they were fucking done –

The source of the cold arrived and the asset flung himself at it as the cannon fodder discharged their weapons. It burnt – hey, we’re here to help, just calm down, the cold form was saying, a man made of ice – but he’d fight with all he had. He had to protect his master before he was decommissioned; at least that.

He slashed and slashed, but he could only chip the cold man, unleashing ice shrapnel that was bound to harm his master. He let himself fall to a crouch on the ground, shouting for the cannon fodder to protect his master.

As he did so, the cold man was joined by two mutants. A metallic man and a woman with short hair. The asset stayed low as he studied the three mutants. There must be a way to overpower them, play one against the other and slip away undetected. His only priority was his master; he could leave the cannon fodder behind.

[left behind like always, like –]

[that’s not true!]

He was defective. He was losing it. His master wasn’t safe around him; he couldn’t even protect him adequately, and now his mind was wandering. Useless.

A suicide attack, then. To distract the mutants as his master slipped away.

They were standing there, as if he wasn’t a menace, but he’d show them. And his master. He’d show everyone he was a good boy.

He sprang.

His master was shouting to come back, please come back, oh god I’m fucked, he was screaming. Bullets were flying.

The mutants split. The two men run past him; as he turned to follow them to protect his master, the woman fell upon him. He swung, but his claws met nothing; it was as if her body was made of air.
He shook his head. There was something in his mind, and it was making him sloppy. The woman was impossible to face. Her body was intangible, and he could lash out all he wanted, but he couldn’t manage to hit her.

But she wasn’t harming him. She was playing with him, but she wasn’t doing anything. She was grimacing, her breath coming fast in little puffs of exertion, but she wasn’t doing anything to him. She could just push a hand inside him and squeeze it around some major organ, but she wasn’t doing so.

This meant that the mutants wanted him, not his master.

The asset turned his attention to the rest of the fight. The cannon fodder was losing. His master was screaming to just let him go, oh god, please, he’d tell them everything they wanted to know, this wasn’t even his idea –

No, he wasn’t pathetic. He was trying to survive. And the asset would ensure it. It was his duty. He was defective, but this, at least, he could do.

“Let him go,” he said, turning to the woman. “It’s me you want.” Perhaps he’d manage to kill some of them, if they lowered their guard around him. But what mattered the most, what he must focus on now, was securing his master’s safety.

The woman looked startled. Then her eyes went strange, like earlier. Like she wasn’t listening to what was in front of her, but her attention was focused elsewhere.

So the asset saw an opening, and took it. He swung fast, aiming for her guts –

What was wrong with him? He stumbled as the woman took a step back, his claws going through her flesh like it was air. Her gaze darkened, but then the cold was at his back again, pushing him down, down, down –

He slammed face first on the floor, panting for air, something cold encasing his torso, he couldn’t move –

Just stay there, okay, I don’t think a kiss is gonna do much this time –

Bobby, what the hell are you talking about?

What was happening? What was wrong with his head? What was wrong with him?

He was defective, and a liability, and he couldn’t even protect his master. So if the mutants wanted
him, he had to take himself away from them. His hands were near his head. He angled them right, slowly, as the mutants talked. There were other people coming. His master was being manhandled, but he was alive. They’d let him live. He’d been right; it was him they wanted.

The asset unsheathed his claws –

But there was, suddenly, cold ice around his hands and claws. He couldn’t even put an end to himself. He was a property after all, he knew that, and yet –

[leave me alone, oh god please, leave me alone –]

What have you done to him, you sick psycho? asked the cold man. Even his voice was cold.

Nothing! I swear, he does that on his own, he always does it –

He… always tries to kill himself?

Yes! his master screamed. It’s not us, you think we wanted him to do that, come on –

The asset didn’t remember this thing his master was saying. He’d tried before? Was that the reason why they’d never sent him on mission? Because he was defective, wrong in the head, and he always tried to kill himself? And he couldn’t even remember it?

[can’t even do that right]

The asset struggled. He retracted his claws and then unsheathed them again, hoping to crack the ice, but it was pointless. And he hated that numb feeling they gave him, hated not being in control of at least this thing –

But he was never in control. He was a good boy and he did what he was told. Why did this bother him?

Why did the cold make him want to scream? What was wrong with him?

[Daken]

Yes, he knew that was his name. Why did the voice say it with such urgency?

[Daken!]

Daken! This last time it came from the real world. Someone was running towards him, shouting that word, his name, over and over again. A woman. No – a woman, and a man…?

The man smelt of death.

The asset screamed. He trashed about –

[undignified]

[leave me alone, please, let me die, let me –]

- but he couldn’t move, the cold ice kept him pinned. He was trapped, trapped with – with – why did the man’s scent set him off like that, like a madman? Why, why, why, why, why, why, why –

Oh, he’s gone, his master was saying, as if from a great distance, with a small voice. No way to make him come back from that. We usually dose him and t-t-terminate him –
There was a snarl, and a scream. Blood. But it was all muffled, far away. There was only the cold, and the knowledge he was gone, defective, mad, he couldn't even off himself, a liability, he'd lost his master, he'd lost everything, and why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why –

[we need to wait, I'm afraid we'll only do more damage]

Why were there voices in his head, why, why, why, why, why, why, why –

Look at what the fuck he's trying to -! And you're telling me to wait?

[don't call me boy, you can't call me boy, you don't get to call me boy, no one will ever call me boy again]

Logan, calm down.

But he was a good boy, he was, he was, he was, he was, he was, he was, he was –

Jesus Christ, do something, I can't –

Move. Iceman, call your ice off.

But –

You heard them. He doesn’t like it. Do it.

[no he didn't, he didn't like the cold, he didn't -]

[please please please please]

Just let him, let him, let him, let him, let him, let him, let him –

He could. They'd let him. He was free. His hands were warming up. Free. He punched, aiming for his own head, but something warm grabbed his wrists before his claws could even graze his skull. Firm. Unrelenting. Slowly pushing his hands away from his head.

He felt light-headed. Blood. Sticky –

Daken, a voice said, close to him. A woman’s. Daken. Listen to me.

[leave me alone!]

He unsheathed his wrist claws. He pierced her flesh, he smelt her blood, but she didn’t let out a sound. She kept holding his wrists.

Her blood –

[don't hurt her don't you dare hurt her don't you fucking hurt her]

Let me go, let me go, let me go, let me go –

[help me! Oh god help me, help me -]

Daken, we'll help you. I’m here, brother. I’m here.

He couldn't hurt her. He couldn't, couldn't, couldn't –

Oh, God. The male voice, the man who smelt like death. Oh, my boy, my poor boy –
A good boy, he was a good boy, a good boy, he was a good, a good, a good, a good –

He was flipped to the side. The woman was all over him, her body pressed against his, her arms around his head. They were wet and slick with blood. She held his head firmly, he couldn’t move it. He tried to stab himself but she kept moving in the way, intertwining their bodies and he couldn’t harm her, he couldn’t, he couldn’t –

It’s all right, she kept saying. We’ll help. I’ll help. I’m here, Daken. I’m here for you. I’m here. I’m right here. I’ll help. I’m here.

It’s okay, I’ve got you. You’re safe.

I’m here.

[L-L-Lau-?]

“Please,” the asset whimpered, defeated. His voice was muffled by the woman’s flesh. He didn’t know what he was asking for. “Please.”

Chapter End Notes

Next: Logan grapples with a decision.

[Rescued at last! I had no intention to drag the search for too long. Now, obviously this is far from over – there will be consequences. What do you think will happen? How long will it take for Daken to get better? Will Logan deal with any of this better than every other time? Is Laura going to stop putting it all on her shoulders? I’d love to hear your thoughts! ^-^ If you prefer, you can come and leave me a message at my tumblr, gealach-in-a-misty-world.tumblr.com]
Logan grapples with a decision.

That sight would haunt Logan until he died.

He’d always see it, in every waking moment – in every nightmare. It would always be at the forefront of his mind, a horrifying image burnt in his retinas.

His son – his poor son – writhing on the floor in an effort to get away from him. Banging his head against the cold metallic surface, again and again and again, his hair matted with his own blood. The sound of his skull almost cracking before Laura intervened. Trying to stab himself in the head. Sobbing, and screaming, and whimpering. What little Logan could make out of what he was feverishly whispering, made Logan’s blood run cold. Calling himself a good boy; asking why with a broken, wretched voice – over and over again, like a broken record. What little Jean had managed to tell Logan filled him with dread. The boy’s thoughts were fragmented, floating. A thousand screaming voices. The telepaths said that they may need to wait, to let the chemicals leave naturally his system, because they didn’t know how that variable could affect their work. Rachel quietly added that his mind must have been a mess even before Soteira, so full it was of psychic scars, and they needed peace and quiet and time and a hale body.

And that meant waiting it out – moving his bloodied son with great care to the Blackbird. Moving Laura with him, for she wouldn’t leave him, and he clung to her like a newborn.

Logan had wept at the sight of his two children so close. He was still crying, and no one in the jet dared say a word.

Laura had taken charge immediately upon seeing her distressed brother. She didn’t show an inch of interest for the men they’d captured; she’d gone straight for Daken, ordered Bobby to release him immediately – Betsy said that Daken had been triggered by the cold… that it had woken him up, in a way, so they should be grateful for it. Logan had a hard time being grateful at seeing his son so wrecked. The man they’d found with him – Kitty said Daken was calling him master, and protecting him – said it happened a lot. He said that Daken would be set off by random things and often try to kill himself. The only way to stop him was dosing him with a heavier dose of the chemical and terminate him. Kill him, he meant.

Hank was going to study the substance. Until he was sure of what could and couldn’t be done, though, he concurred it might be best not to tinker with Daken’s mind yet. That could mean hours, perhaps days, of this agony. Logan could hear the cries – his son’s cries – from the cockpit, where he’d holed himself up.
Laura and Daken were occupying a cot at the back of the Blackbird. She’d enfolded him in her harms protectively, holding him still. The boy had stopped trying to hurt himself; now he was just sobbing.

Rachel had told Logan, as they took their seats in the cockpit, that Daken didn’t know what they wanted with him. He was confused and hurting; he thought they might be his new masters. The telepaths thought that Soteira probably had never left Daken awake for long periods of time, so this new experience was doing numbers on him on its own, without going into the fact he’d been programmed.

This whole thing was badly affecting Rachel. She was green with nausea, her eyes blazing with righteous fury. She was thinking back on her own slavery, perhaps.

Slavery. That’s what this was. Slavery. And for what?

Logan seethed. They’d decided to take the Wolverine from his tomb, had said the vermin who’d been trying to leave with Daken; but then, when they’d realized the X-Men had caught up and were after them, and simultaneously found themselves with Daken in their hands… they’d decided to let Logan go, believing the X-Men would stop looking. And for what? All of this, for what?

For fucking corporate espionage, apparently. Business. Just to offer a service to ruthless companies. They’d taken a killing machine to sell to the highest bidder. Just that. No nefarious plans for world domination – just good old money. And oh, how much money there was to be had with this business.

They’d destroyed Logan, and then his son, for fucking money.

Every single person that had made it possible would pay for this. He’d take care of it. He’d leave Daken at the school, and go. Laura would take good care of him; she knew what she was doing. And Daken hadn’t reacted to her the same way he’d reacted to Logan. He was scared of him; Logan couldn’t do anything to help him. But this – this he could do. This, he knew how to do. He’d find every single one of Soteira’s members, and kill them slowly, and painfully. If it was the last thing he did, he’d take them all down with him.

He was good at killing, after all. That would never change. They’d wanted a weapon? Oh, they’d meet one. They’d be served justice.

He didn’t think that the people the X-Men had found at the facility were the only ones involved. There must be someone else. Someone to track down and punish.

No one hurt him – no one hurt his family – and lived to tell the tale, or make others think they could give it a try too. No one did that to his family. No one.

Once they touched down, he’d go. It was better this way; no speeches, no way for anyone to talk him out of it. He was set on this: it was the right thing to do.

Oh, they’d try. He could feel, skirting at the edges of his mind, Jean’s psychic signature. He knew it deeply, it resonated within him – it still unsettled him somewhat, but it was different in some way from what he remembered (rings of fire and cruel, mocking laughter), so that helped.

It was there, just skimming the surface of his thoughts, so she obviously knew what he was planning. She couldn’t let that slide and would certainly orchestrate an intervention.

He wasn’t going to be deterred by anything she threw his way.
Too bad it came in the shape of people he loved.

He smelt brimstone. It always lingered around Kurt, no matter how much time had passed from his last teleportation. It was a facet of his scent, just like petrichor was ’Ro’s.

A low blow on Jeannie’s part.

Kurt had stayed behind, but now he was in the cockpit. Rachel left without a word – she was the closest to Logan – and Kurt took her place. He didn’t speak; he just sat there – a steadfast, quiet presence.

’Ro would have said something by now. But she was in the other jet, and perhaps Logan preferred it this way. The both of them knew when to speak and when to be silent – he loved them so for it – but she was stricter with her words of reproach, despite the warm kindness beneath. ’Ro would have plunged ahead, certain of her conviction, but Logan wouldn’t listen to anything now. And Kurt’s silences were always as meaningful as his words.

Sneaky on Jeannie’s part, although a decision ruled by chance. She’d be gone for so long, and yet she read their dynamics with ease. He’d been gone for a long time too, and yet he’d slipped back into what they’d built those last few months after Kurt’s return, before his own death – that comfortable lull that was just the three of them. The moment they’d been reunited, there in Betsy’s room, it had finally clicked, ’Ro falling into place as well. The wariness he’d felt around her after his return had vanished when they’d become three again; together, they worked, each of them bringing balance to the other two.

He needed balance more than them, of course.

And Jeannie had seen right through it, even though she’d never seen the three of them together. And now – well, there was no other way to say it. She was using his affection to make him come to his senses. Sending Kurt to his side like a soldier in her war.

Her message was clear. He couldn’t go on a murdering rampage, not when the world stood on the brink of war against mutants. She couldn’t allow him to taint the image she was so desperately trying to project – that of a united, peaceful mutant nation. She hadn’t given him her pitch yet, but he’d seen what she’d been up to – he was slowly but surely catching up to all the things that had happened while he was gone, and her alliance with Namor and her fight with Cassandra Nova had been high on the list.

Jean was trying to make the world a better place. Nothing wrong with that – hell, it was a beautiful dream, something all of the X-Men had worked hard for, bled for, lost their very lives for – but some people didn’t deserve to live to see it. He couldn’t sit it out and play nice while some of the people who’d taken him and his son, who’d hurt them, who’d used them, were probably still out there and thinking of doing it again.

But if it meant going against his friends, going against those he loved – could he do it? Kurt and ’Ro were sold on Jean’s dream… even part of her team. Could he go against them? Could they go against him? He’d just found them again; he couldn’t tear their love apart.

Was Jean really going to make them all choose?

Kurt caught his hand and he turned, caught off-guard. The two of them had never been this open with their relationship, but he supposed he didn’t quite care as he gazed upon his elf’s kind yellow eyes. He exuded calm, and squeezed reassuringly Logan’s hand.
Why was he forced to choose between this warmth and what ought to be done? It was cruel. Cruel and necessary, perhaps; not so unlike the Phoenix then, after all.

But he couldn’t be deterred. His son’s cries were a reminder of what needed to be done, and he’d deliver. He had to.

He hoped Jean would be able to live with the choice she was forcing upon the three of them. Was she hearing his thoughts right now, spying on him, and determining a course of action? Would she have the guts to do it?

Why did it have to be this way?

God, he knew why. He was Wolverine, and conflict and death always followed in his wake. He’d thought he’d found some peace, in those last moments before dying; a kind of understanding of the good things in his life too. But now he was back, and all that was left was bloody revenge.

The landing caught him off guard, so focused was he on his own thoughts, on Kurt’s hand, on Daken’s sobs. He let Kurt urge him to stay seated as the others left the cockpit, knowing what was about to come and dreading it – hoping to salvage some last moments together. ’Ro was surely bound to appear too.

They listened in silence as Kitty organized the transportation for his children. Logan craned his neck to catch sight of them, there at the back of the Blackbird: they still lay so closely entwined that his heart clenched. He could hear Laura’s soft murmurs as she attempted to soothe Daken’s growing agitation; the hold door was open and the boy’s nostrils were likely being assailed by the scent of even more people outside. Too many people. He was trashing about now – agitated again, horribly distraught, in such a state Logan’s chest hurt and he almost found it hard to breathe.

Kurt chose that moment – Logan’s defenses low, his mind filled with rage and grief – to speak. “Hey,” he murmured, and Logan was drawn to him like a magnet, striving for a distraction – anything to keep his thoughts off the weeping sight of his son. “He needs you, Logan,” he said softly, so softly; Logan recoiled.

“No, not me.” This was what they were going to play on? His goddamn guilt? Laura had pushed that button too, but he couldn’t put such nastiness on her. Bless her, she really thought that Logan could make a difference – that he could help. But Daken’s reaction to him was proof enough. For the boy to heal, Logan had to go. “Laura has it covered. They don’t need me.” His children had each other.

They were being lowered out of the Blackbird now, and Logan could hear Gabby’s frantic questioning as she saw them; they’d managed to make her stay put at the school, but now there was no way to keep her from seeing the damage. She was calling out for Daken, the little thing, her voice cracking; asking Laura what was wrong with him. Laura was reassuring her that all would be well, that they’d help Daken, that he’d heal.

But they didn’t need Logan for it. In fact, his presence would probably do more damage than good. This was why he had to go – go do something useful in its own right, something to fix what had been done.

“They do need you. Daken, and Laura too.” Kurt was caressing his knuckles. It struck him so, to be touched so gently where he was most dangerous. They did love to do it, to show him he wasn’t a dangerous beast. ’Ro would often kiss between his knuckles too, always so fiery daring. “Your family. And us. Stay here, Logan. Help them. Help yourself.” He bent to brush his lips against the back of Logan’s hand. It shocked his protestations out of him. They were warm, Kurt’s lips. Hotter than an average person’s. And so, so soft on Logan’s abused skin. “Don’t leave us so soon.”
Logan’s heart was in his throat. He couldn’t. It wasn’t—he wasn’t good at any of it. He didn’t know what to do. He’d make mistakes… he knew it. He’d ruin everything.

He’d stood mere inches from his son’s body, and hadn’t snapped out of what they’d done to him. He hadn’t saved him.

He’d killed him.

The fresh scent of rain on dry soil. He looked up to see ’Ro board the Blackbird, regal and kind and so beautiful. He was utterly lost.

He had to leave. Leave, and exact the Wolverine’s bloody vengeance. Leave the rest to Laura, let her pick up the pieces of Daken’s fragmented soul. He’d done enough damage to the boy; how could he be expected to be useful? Why did no one realize he’d only make a mess of it?

“Logan.” She was by his side now, his ’Ro. His goddess and his elf, both of them by his side. His pillars. He felt his resolve crumble already.

She took his free hand, linked their fingers together. She was warm, too. So warm.

“Leave it to us, Logan. The X-Men will deal with this.” There was a steel in her voice that he’d learnt to respect far before he’d realized he loved her. A spine-tingling, thunder-cracking pressure. “I’ll rain such terror on their hearts they’ll regret it’s not you going after them.” And God, he could believe her. There was the force of a hurricane beneath her voice. “Stay here, Logan,” she added gently. “Stay, and be with your family.”

It was the unrelenting nature of storms. It carried in her voice, left him stranded with the truth he didn’t want to face.

He was fleeing. Hiding. Running away. Always more focused on the next revenge, on some reason to not be there. And hadn’t he done enough of that?

His family did need him; he was just too scared to stay. He was always scared.

And, by God, this time he’d stay. He’d stay, and try to fix it all.

He wasn’t alone anymore, after all. No more excuses. Others would take care of the monsters; it was time he took care of his family.

This time, he’d do his damnedest best.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Laura protects her siblings.

[Logan and his fight/flight mode, amirite? This man has serious problems with taking responsibility. And dealing with trauma. And everything, really. I like how both Kurt and Ororo counterbalance that. Neither of them take his bullshit at face value. And he respects them, the both of them, so much. They work well together. On that note, I’m treating this polyamory as already established, but sadly Marvel isn’t]
that brave yet. I’m sure there will be some drama with Ororo and Jean when he comes back in the comics.
Let me know what you think! Your comments keep me going ^-^ You’re also welcome to come chat at my tumblr, gealach-in-a-misty-world.tumblr.com ]
Laura protects her siblings.

Chapter Notes

**Trigger warnings**: attempted self-harm, distressed child, child harm.

I’ve added a few tags, please check them out. Stay safe!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

10.

Laura wasn’t going to leave Daken’s side.

He’d latched onto her with the intensity of a scared child. He was so different from what she’d seen of Logan’s time in Soteira’s clutches: the monsters hadn’t created a cold-blooded mercenary, but a confused puppet. It broke her heart to see him so hurt and out of sorts. He went from manically muttering that he was defective and there was something wrong with his head, to sobbing bouts; and throughout it all he clung to her desperately, but not so hard to hurt her, not even lightly. He would wince and shake his head when his fingers insomuch as threatened to dig into her flesh; and a few times he accompanied that motion with a fervent whisper, seemingly reminding himself that he couldn’t hurt her – like he’d done when she’d stopped him from killing himself, at the facility. He’d stabbed her to get free, but then he’d almost frozen, panicked and desperate. He hadn’t even tried to use his pheromones against her – he still hadn’t, in truth, and that was worrying in itself; had Soteira blocked them somehow?

But she’d understood that the only thing that would protect him from himself was getting in his way.

That – maybe – meant he was still there, hidden beneath the layers that the chemical had formed in his brain. He was there, and he was fighting to come back to them… and Laura would be there for him, every step of the way.

She feared she’d be alone in that endeavor.

Logan was retreating to silence and fuming, but she didn’t have time for that. She didn’t have the time to deal with his doubts again, not so soon. She couldn’t constantly coach him through what needed to be done. She’d done what she could; now it was up to him. She couldn’t hold his hand while he panicked; there was someone else that needed her undivided attention.

She understood that seeing Daken like that must have hurt Logan just as much as it had hurt her. And seeing Daken so scared of him had upset him, of course. But he didn’t see that it was a good sign as well. Such strong reactions meant that they hadn’t managed to break him completely – the reason for his suicide attempts, no doubt. This also meant that triggering him – and awake his memories, his very essence – could end badly, like they’d witnessed… but his response to Laura was different. He trusted her.

He didn’t trust Logan.

So she could see that Logan keeping his distance, for now, was good. But he had to be there when
they brought Daken back. And she feared he’d still stay away instead.

But still. She couldn’t worry about that now. She held the trembling body of her brother, and she’d shield him from the world.

Their arrival at the school had alarmed Daken. Too many people, probably; too much chaos, and he still didn’t know – didn’t understand – what they wanted with him. He was distressed, simultaneously trying to jerk away and hide his face against her chest; calming him down seemed impossible. Still, she did all she could, caressing his hair and murmuring reassurances – they’d help; he was safe; she was there for him.

Touching his hair seemed to help. He liked that: sometimes he let Gabby brush it, and he always closed his eyes in contentedness. Laura was glad that such a small thing from before bled through what Soteira had done. He wasn’t relaxed now, not really – he couldn’t be – but he calmed down enough to let the others move him and Laura to a gurney and then take them out of the Blackbird.

It didn’t last long. Gabby came out of nowhere, asking frantic questions. She was loud, and close, and undeterable; all things Daken couldn’t handle right now. There wasn’t a flicker of recognition in his eyes, but rather of panic; perhaps later, with a quieter environment, they could try, but for now Gabby was just another element of disturbance. Laura reassured her that all would be well, that Daken was safe and they’d all help him; but she also tried to impart that now wasn’t the time to stand so close and attempt to engage Daken in a conversation that he wasn’t coherent enough to have.

She got it, thankfully. Her eyes lit with understanding – perhaps Jean had something to do with that as well – and she went quiet, a feat that was difficult to accomplish on its own. Laura called it a victory.

Still, Gabby followed along as they were led to the med bay. She wasn’t alone; Old Logan was with her, and Jubilee – Laura felt a pang of gratitude for her friend. It was good to have her so near, to know she supported Laura. Jubilee had always stayed with her, for her. She was, in a way, her rock. Always so cheerful and kind and ready to diffuse the tension, and so strong.

She was glad Jubilee was there.

As they left the hangar, the angle permitted her a good view of the Blackbird. Logan was at its door – flanked by Ororo and Kurt – and he nodded at her with an air of finality.

So he was going to stay, and fight. She felt lighter; she was ready to embark on this journey alone, but knowing Logan wasn’t going to run away – like he so often did – was a relief. He’d been so distant, after Daken’s death; always chasing something different every week, so volatile and desperate. Perhaps, she’d often found herself thinking, perhaps if he’d been more present at the time, she wouldn’t have been kidnapped by Arcade – perhaps he’d have noticed sooner, he’d have come to her rescue. People wouldn’t have died. It was one of the reasons why she’d distanced herself from him, after, why she’d decided to stay with the Original Five; some of the trust and affection she’d slowly managed to feel for him had simply gone. And she still mourned the bit of distance that had created, a distance never closed before his death – never touched upon.

She was glad he’d decided to stay. He’d overcome at least some of his self-destructive behavior, for Daken’s sake. That was good.

_Don’t you think you should tell him how you feel?_

Laura managed to not show outward surprise at the intrusion; she was accustomed to Jean by now. But it was Rachel that had just talked to her, not her mother. The telepath was walking ahead, beside
Pryde; Jean and Braddock were elsewhere, tasked with the prisoners’ interrogation.

She didn’t like such breach of her privacy. *I think now is not the time*, she projected crisply, *And none of your business either.*

*Fair enough.* She couldn’t see Rachel, but she seemed to smell contrite. *That’s not why I was contacting you. I need you to stay calm, for Daken’s sake.*

*Meaning?* The fact that Rachel walked a few steps ahead of her and yet chose to address Laura this way alerted her.

*Meaning I’m going to back you up, so don’t get agitated. Your brother seems to be very sensitive to your moods.*

Okay. She could stay calm, or at least appear so. That was a skill she’d learnt young. *Back me up on what?* Subtly, she positioned herself to better shield Daken. Given the slight change in Old Logan’s breathing, he noticed. He’d be ready for whatever happened.

*We’re going to help Daken, Rachel said. We’re giving him sanctuary, and we’ll help him in any way needed.*

That was what Pryde had assured her already. *But?*

*But Kitty feels your brother’s unpredictable right now.* Rachel definitely smelt apologetic. And conflicted. She was betraying Pryde’s confidence; that was why. *He tried to stab her; he’s brainwashed—*

*I know that.* It came out more aggressive than what she’d have wanted to convey, but the slow approach was both grating on her nerves and alarming her. *What has she planned?*

*She wants to contain him, just until we get him back. I won’t let her, Laura,* Rachel added, because she was too dumbfounded to react. *We can easily find another way—*

“What’s that?” There was a screech of outrage in Gabby’s voice. Apparently they’d reached their destination. “Are you for real right now? Laura!”

That didn’t bode well.

*Just remember I’m going to back you up,* Rachel reminded her, and Laura acknowledged it and dismissed it as she slowly extricated herself from Daken’s frantic hold. Gabby’s high-pitched protestation must have upset him.

As she sat up and knelt beside Daken, her fingers automatically closing around his wrists, she thought that Gabby had been even too civil.

They were in the med bay. At the far end of it, a bed was ready for Daken, Hank waiting beside it with medical instruments for his check-up. He was grimacing.

The bed was made of metal. It could even be adamantium, for all Laura knew, and she couldn’t certainly put it past Pryde. A mattress lay over it, and it seemed comfortable enough, but that idea was diffused by the thick metallic bands on each side of it and at its feet, designed to hold a person down by their limbs. At the top were various straps. The bed was separated from the rest of the room by a robust glass wall, encased by metal.

Given how little time they’d had to prepare their little trap, one could almost commend them. Or
perhaps the gear was already present at the school – for what, she didn’t want to know.

“How dare you?” she said quietly. Pryde had the good grace to look mildly uncomfortable, even if it was just for a moment. Then she clenched her jaw.

“It’s for his safety just as much as ours,” she shot. “There are children here, Laura. We can’t risk –”

“He’s not an animal,” Laura interrupted her, still so very softly. She could be calm, even if the sight enraged her more than Pryde had probably realized, her own memories cloying her like mud. “And he won’t be manacled in a cage just because you didn’t think hard enough, Pryde.”

“That’s a hard no from me too,” Gabby piped in before Pryde could formulate a retort. Laura didn’t turn to see her sister, but she heard the scowl in her voice.

“ Seriously, Kitty,” Jubilee added, “what the hell.” Old Logan didn’t speak, but his heavy silence was good enough for Laura.

Pryde crossed her arms. “I have to think of the bigger picture. I’m sorry, but I won’t have him wander the school at night, murdering people in their sleep –”

“We’ll keep watch, Kitty,” Rachel spoke up, tapping two fingers against her temple. Laura had just been beginning to think when was the telepath going to ‘back her up’. “We’ll take turns. There really is no need –”

“Seriously, Ray?” Pryde turned on her, her face contorting – well, with an odd mixture of emotions, betrayal amongst them. She hadn’t smelt upset up until now, as she regarded her friend. “You said his mind’s a maze. You spent hours on Logan. Are you willing to bet the students’ safety on something you three admitted you can’t have a clear control over yet?”

Rachel grimaced. “Others can patrol this corridor –”

“I’m in,” Old Logan said quietly, but Pryde shook her head.

“Have you seen his videos? No? Well, I have.” They must have found something at the facility. “Logan’s videos, then?” Pryde continued with a grimace, “No, I can’t let this slide, I’m sorry.” Oh, she wasn’t sorry. At all. But she would be. Laura took a breath –

“Mistress?”

Laura didn’t know what shocked and enraged her more. That word? Or the deferential way Daken uttered it?

Either way, the stunned silence gave him an opportunity. He’d kept quiet, or weeping, up until now, so she’d thought he wasn’t coherent enough, or even lucid enough to understand what went on around him – but now he was half-sitting up, although making no attempt to free his wrists, and keeping his head lowered. And also turned towards her. This meant he was effectively bowing to Laura.

“They’re right, mistress. I could hurt someone. They can’t trust me not to. It’s the best solution, mistress, to be sure I stay put.” He sounded so reasonable and polite about his own imprisonment and he was talking to her. To Laura.

She shuddered, fought the lump in her throat and the rage in her veins. “I’m not your mistress.”

He held himself very still for a moment. “Then the intangible woman is my mistress?”
“Oy vey,” Pryde breathed. Gabby made a sound like a wounded animal. Laura didn’t have that luxury, though. She had to stay strong.

“No one’s your mistress,” she managed to say without her voice quivering.

“Nor your master,” Rachel added softly. She slowly took a few steps towards them. “Daken, you are a free man. And you’re hurt. Your mind has been hurt severely.” She reached out – Laura felt it, felt Rachel’s aura coming past her like a gentle brush, perceived it attempting to touch Daken… who shook his head suddenly, like a dog. Rachel stilled, a flicker of alarm in her eyes. “We’ll help you –”

But Daken was becoming agitated again, his teeth clattering, his head shaking violently. “No, I – I’m a good boy,” he muttered in desperation, “I can serve, I promise, I’ll be useful, I’m a good boy, I’m obedient, I’m not – I’m not defective, I’m not, I’m not, I’m not, I’m not, I’m not, I’m not, I’m not –” and on and on and on he went.

It was like at the facility. That broken, frantic repeating of the same word, over and over again. ‘He’s gone,’ the man they’d captured had whimpered as Daken slammed his head against the floor. ‘No way to make him come back from that,’ he’d added, looking around in fear, eyeing Logan – but they’d managed to make Daken come back from that. Laura had managed to get through to him, to stop his violent attempts. Without resorting to shutting him down, like Pryde was undoubtedly contemplating to ask Rachel as her fears were confirmed – he was volatile, and needed to be restrained.

Not on Laura’s watch.

She lowered her head, her hands tight around Daken’s wrists. She could see the movement beneath his skin – the tips of his claws almost resurfacing from between his knuckles. He was about to try to hurt himself again. He’d stop as soon as she got in the way, but in the meantime he’d try, and she didn’t want Gabby to witness that.

“Daken,” she said firmly. “Daken, listen to me. It’s all right. You’re safe. I’m here,” she stumbled as he began rocking on the gurney, but she managed to keep her balance. “We’ll solve everything, we’ll help, I promise, you’re safe, you’re safe –”

“Tell me again there’s no need to restrain him,” Pryde said, likely counting on the fact Laura wouldn’t stop her litany of reassurances to confront her. “He even agrees!”

“Shut up!” Gabby shrieked. And then she was, suddenly, beside them. “Daken? Daken, it’s all right! I promise!”

She was too close.

It was a moment. Laura was focused on Daken’s shaking body, on his wrecked voice; hyperaware of every minute movement he made and ready to stop him from harming himself.

That was her only focus.

So when he jerked violently his arm, in an attempt to free a hand and probably stab himself, she simply pulled back. She registered half a second later the wet sound, the crash of bone against cartilage, the yelp.

The blood.

She turned, overcome by dread. Gabby stood, a hand raised gingerly to touch her bleeding, flattened nose. She met Laura’s eyes and smiled, the fluid running past her lips, staining her teeth. “’s all ride,”
she said, “’b healig, I’b good!”

It wasn’t – by far – the worst injury she’d ever sustained. In fact, it was a ridiculous wound that would heal in moments, and she didn’t even feel the pain.

It was just an elbow to the face. Daken’s elbow.

But for a split second, Laura feared for Gabby. She knew it was irrational. She’d seen her fight fiercely and dirty, she’d even seen her fight Daken – but Daken had been non-confrontational at the time, precisely focused on not hitting back. And now he wasn’t in control.

During that second of horror, she tightened her hold on Daken’s wrists – even too much, probably too painfully – but there was no need of it. He’d gone almost slack, and he was rubbing his face against the gurney, his words – albeit slightly muffled – clear and intelligible due to the stunned silence following the accidental jab. “Don’t hurt her, don’t hurt her, don’t hurt her, don’t hurt her, don’t hurt her –”

Gabby, already healed, went on cheerfully, as if nothing had happened. “I’m fine! See, I’m fine, it’s all right, it’s okay –” She even moved to comfort him, to lay a hand over his shoulder, but Daken sobbed and jerked away, and he would have fallen out of the gurney if Laura hadn’t caught him. But he probably didn’t even register the motion.

“I’m sorry,” he was muttering now. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry –”

At least he’d stopped trying to hurt himself.

He was there. He was still there, hidden deep in his own mind, and somehow he recognized Gabby too. He wanted to protect her.

As did Laura.

She looked around. Gabby stood there, her hand still raised, her sad eyes fixed on Daken. And Pryde – there was a grimace on the woman’s face. She didn’t dare utter a word, but when she met Laura’s gaze, it was clear what she was thinking: she was right, and Daken ought to be contained.

And, even if for a split second, Laura had thought that too. She’d feared for Gabby’s safety. And Daken would hate himself when he came back to them, if he truly hurt his little sister.

It clenched her heart, but there was only one thing to do.

She heard Rachel’s sigh. The telepath looked conflicted, rage and pity darkening her features. It was obvious she felt strongly about this solution, about Daken’s predicament. This went beyond decency, like it simply was for Jean and Braddock. This felt personal to her. After having seen her almost succumb to Mesmero, after witnessing her panic in Ahab’s presence, her rage at being turned into a puppet by Cassandra Nova – Laura understood the feeling. And she was grateful for it, really.

But Pryde was right.

Laura steeled herself and spoke directly to the woman. “All right. We’ll keep him in the room, but you have to take that thing out –”

“No!” Gabby gasped, “No, Laura, you can’t –”

“It’s all right, kid.” Jubilee embraced her from behind, her gaze on Laura. She nodded subtly at her – she understood what she was planning. Of course she did. “It’s going to be just for a little while,
okay?"

Gabby shook her head vehemently, shock and betrayal all over her face. Her eyes were welled with tears. She didn’t understand.

But this was for the best.

Pryde cocked her head. She’d understood, too. Or perhaps Rachel had told her. “I can do that. You want beds instead?”

“One will suffice. A double, if you will.” Laura adjusted her hold on Daken, his wretched muttering still going. He was completely out of it.

She’d be there for him.

She was going to stay with him in the secure room until they brought him back.

Chapter End Notes

*Next: Logan meets someone.*

[Yes, no worries. No way in hell Laura was going to let Daken be restrained like that. That contraption doesn’t exist in the comics, to my knowledge, but I think that, with the number of times Logan gets mind-controlled, something like that could be there at the school, ready for a rainy day. I wouldn’t be too hard on Kitty. Yes, we love Daken and we hate to see him like that, but she obviously sees a threat to the students. She did go a bit far, but I think her heart was in the right place – and she can be talked down. I hope this wasn’t too hard to read! We’re going to see very distressed people for a while yet. Let me know if it gets too much – and if I forget to tag something, too. I try to be careful, but I’m only human.]
Logan was loitering outside the med bay.

It was late, but he couldn’t sleep, restlessly tossing and turning. It had been a long, too idle day. True to her word, 'Ro had insisted that he rested as the X-Men investigated. She’d brought him to her room and left him there with Kurt as she joined the others. Kurt had done his best to keep Logan’s mind off things, but he kept going over what he’d witnessed at the facility – his son’s face covered with blood, his terror, his attempts to take his own life. Laura’s firm comfort. And Gabby’s worry, later, at seeing Daken like that.

His boy had found a family. Someone who cared for him, and took care of him. And Logan, once again, had found himself entertaining the thought that he didn’t need to be there, not really. Daken was in good hands –

But he needed more. He needed a strong front, a united family. Logan would rise to the challenge. He had the opportunity to do some good, finally. To mend something, to help his son heal.

And he’d done enough running. Daken deserved at least a try. If he didn’t want anything to do with Logan, Logan would comply – but he owed it to him to be there. Even if seeing his boy so terrified of him hurt like hell.

“It’s a good sign,” Kurt had told him softly, his fingers running through Logan’s hair. “It means he’s there, Logan. It means he’s fighting.”

It meant that, despite him supposedly making peace with Logan – that’s what Laura had told Logan, and he acknowledged that organizing a funeral did speak of that – Logan’s return had put a dent in it. Logan had killed him, after all. So with his murdering father gone, Daken had been able to confront his feelings towards him… but Logan’s return had brought some of that back. And it was feelings strong enough to bleed through the brainwashing. Hate, perhaps. Or something along those lines.

Hate, and love. Love for his sister: it must be strong to permit him to graze the hold that Logan himself hadn’t managed to escape upon seeing him captured and unconscious. That he was capable of feeling such affection for Laura made Logan proud. It meant his son wasn’t irredeemable.

And he was strong, too. He put Logan to shame; only a strong mind would have been able to resist what had been done to them. Where Logan had failed, Daken had retained enough control to be somewhat aware of what was happening, and even attempt to stop it – by harming himself. It was heroic, really: Daken would have rather died than letting those men use him as a tool.

Jean said that such resistance might be born of something else in his mind. She’d come by to update
Logan: they were working on finding the other bastards. As for his son – Rachel, Jean said, had sensed something while they put him in the med bay. Echoes in his mind; the three telepaths had managed to feel it at the facility too, but then it had been too chaotic to discern. Now, though, Rachel had apparently sensed more. A shadow, looming deep. Traps and frameworks that Charles, years ago, had warned Logan about.

It was possible that whatever Romulus had done to Daken was the foundation for his resistance to the chemicals. Building upon it, Daken must have carved himself a small space inside his mind that was under attack, and he was reaching out somewhat – there were echoes, when he was distressed and went on repeating the same words. Amongst the cacophony, Rachel had heard something else. A cry for help.

When he went through those moments – the ones the Soteira bastard had talked about, the ones they’d witnessed too – when he seemingly lost his mind and attempted to harm himself – those were the moments when a spark of lucidity came through.

Meaning: when he was lucid, Daken wanted to die. And yet, he called for help too. Rachel had heard him, after all.

There wasn’t much to be done for now, though. Hank was studying the chemical. From his mind Jean had managed to glean that it was a nasty substance, and that Hank was even more sure they should wait. Daken’s mind was hurt enough – what if there was some self-destruction trigger ready to blow everything up at the mere attempt of rescue?

The sensible thing to do, Jean said, was to wait on standby, ready to assist Daken as soon as the effect wore off. By now they were sure it would; the Soteira goons had confirmed that, given their healing factor, both Logan and Daken had needed continuous injections. Now that Daken was free, it was only going to be the matter of a few hours. And then, Jean said, he’d need all the help he could get in order to repair his mind.

“But I didn’t need that,” Logan had said. Kurt had sighed heavily beside him as Jean regarded Logan with a sad gaze. “What’s the point,” he’d exploded, “if you can’t help him now, if you can’t relieve him now? If you think he’s going to repair his mind on his own? Are we to just stand and watch?”

“Daken will need support,” Jean had said. “Just as you. We don’t know how long you stayed in that bunker, Logan, your hurt mind coming back together.” He grimaced. After their trip in his mind to find answers, he did recall some of it. Jean nodded, knowing he remembered. “That must have been a nightmare,” she continued softly, “all sense of time lost, an immeasurable pain. What we can do, Logan, is avoid that for Daken. Help him find himself quicker – and less painfully. And after—” she trailed off. “I want to offer him help, to deal with all that trauma. Rachel feels too involved.” She’d nodded, saddened. “And Betsy’s a bit biased. I don’t know him, so I’ll do it.” Therapy. She was talking about offering Daken therapy.

The mere idea dumbfounded Logan. It seemed strange, but perhaps the kid really needed it. Jean would know; she’d skirted his mind, after all.

Jean had cocked her head, something indefinite in her gaze. Pity? “You may need that too, Logan.”

“Me?” He’d furrowed his brow, taken aback. “Therapy?” He exhaled a startled, uneasy laughter. “Him?”

“Ach, mein Freund.” Kurt had held him then. He smelt upset, and saddened too. Logan had pressed a palm against his Elf’s arm, confused. Why was this about him, all of a sudden?
“Logan,” Jean had said gently, “Don’t you think with all you went through – the both of you – don’t you think you need help sorting through all that?”

Sorting through all that.

No, he’d never thought he needed it. He’d always gone on with his life, confronting his pain and rage with violence and booze. Revenge quest after revenge quest, he’d never stopped a moment to consider getting help to sort through his past. He used to meditate; that helped. Why should he bare his heart to a stranger?

It was, he recalled, a point of contention with ’Ro, and sometimes with Kurt. He opened up, with them, in ways he’d never expected he’d be able to; he’d shared things he’d never thought he could voice. That was enough, wasn’t it? He felt it was.

Jean didn’t agree, obviously, but she left him to confront her suggestion on his own time. Kurt hadn’t insisted – nor had ’Ro, when she’d returned to the room some hours later. They’d had dinner and then they’d gone to bed early at ’Ro’s insistence, huddled together in a way that had once felt warm, and comfortable, and just.

But he couldn’t stop thinking about what Jean had said. He didn’t know if she was right about him needing help, but that was because he wasn’t alone. Companionship had been forced upon him, and then he’d began to seek it. His family – the X-Men – were so many, and one never lacked for opportunities to spill what troubled them.

His son, on the other hand, was completely alone. At least to Logan’s knowledge, Laura was the first person he’d ever welcomed to his life. With all the shit he’d gone through, was this the first time, in almost seventy years, that he had a confidante?

The boy had tried to talk openly to Logan, once. When he was working with Creed, when he’d kidnapped Evan and tied Logan up. He’d bared his soul in that room, lacing his confessions with threats. And Logan had only ever been condescending. Obviously he’d been preoccupied at the time, worried Daken would harm Evan, and then the kids in his care – but wasn’t that what Daken was too? His son, whom he should have protected? Whom had only found death at Logan’s hands?

And before that. His stunt with the bombs, the Wolverine doll hidden in Logan’s room. The panic in his eyes when Logan had confronted him on his relationship with Romulus, and the betrayal as Logan carved his wrist claws out of him. The odd silences as they searched for Cyber, that always seemed to be leading to something more than the barbed insults that came when Logan prodded him.

Had their every interaction been marked by misunderstandings? Had Daken been desperately trying to reach out without knowing how, like a wounded animal – only to meet incomprehension and disregard, until he finally decided it wasn’t worth it?

Charles had told him his son’s mind was filled with scars. And Logan hadn’t heeded him.

He’d wronged his son far worse than he’d thought.

It was these thoughts that finally kicked Logan out of bed. Both Kurt and ’Ro attempted to dissuade him, maybe thinking he was going to make a run for it – but they got quiet when he said he wanted to go visit his son.

“You want us to come with?” ’Ro murmured. She was heavy-lidded with exhaustion, but she’d get up in no time. Kurt, too. The Elf was half sat up already, a leg out of the bed.

He loved them so.
“Nah,” Logan bent to kiss them. “I’m fine. Get some sleep, darlings.”

So now he was outside the med bay. And yet, despite his resolution, shame won out. He couldn’t bring himself to enter; he wasn’t sure he could face the sight that was sure to welcome him. Daken, tossed in a cell to protect everyone else in the school; Laura, willingly staying with him to keep him some company and comfort him. She was stronger than Logan, that was for sure.

The corridor still held traces of others’ passage. Gabby, his old counterpart, Jubilee – they seemed to have stayed the most, orbiting in and out of the med bay. Gabby’s scent lingered by the door, as if they had to forcibly remove her. Her affection for Daken surprised Logan more than Laura’s; he wondered how did Daken act around her. He found himself aching to see it – to witness his son care for a small child. He thought he might burst with love at such a display.

He was stalling. And hadn’t he determined to stop doing that? It was just a door, even if it seemed an insurmountable obstacle. He only had to get past it, and then he’d see his son… and his Laura, who called him “father” so matter-of-factly, as if it hadn’t taken years to win her over.

His children.

His mind made, he moved for the handle – but he stopped, alerted by the sound of someone coming. Whoever it was, he was male, running, and Logan didn’t know him, although he seemed to have smelt him around the school already.

The boy – it was a student, one of the new ones – came into view and abruptly to a halt upon seeing Logan, muttering a “Fuck” under his breath. He looked disheveled and he had that look in his eyes, which Logan knew quite well, of a kid that is where he shouldn’t be and knows it.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Logan said. At least, the others seemed to think so, if he’d evaded someone just to come here – and he didn’t want fixedate strangers around his son, anyway.

“A right? Logan’s interest was piqued – although a shiver of alarm run down his spine at the feverish worry in the boy’s gaze. He was mixed race, Logan saw now; his eyes spoke of an Asian descent.

He changed the line of questioning. “Who are you, kid?” There was a strange flicker in his stomach, a sort of delirious, ridiculous hope –

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“Zach!” Kitty dropped down from the ceiling, a menacing finger pointed at the boy. “You can’t stay here!”

Zach’s face contorted with rage. “Be real grateful you put that thing on me, teach.”

“Yes, keep that attitude. It’s going to help you,” Kitty said coldly.
“I hate you.”

“I’ll live.” Kitty waved a hand. “Get to your room, now. I’m sorry, Logan,” she added, turning towards him – just as the kid made a dive for the door. Given they both were in the way, he didn’t stand a chance.

“What’s happening, Kitty? Who is he? What does he have to do with Daken?” Logan struggled to keep the boy still. He was a little demon, wiggling madly; but the motion finally made Logan see the metal glistening around the kid’s neck, hidden by the shirt. A dampener. He froze. “Are we blocking students’ powers, now?” he growled.

“Yeah, tell her!”

Kitty sighed. “Zach’s on probation. He –” she trailed off, pinched the bridge of her nose. “Why hasn’t anyone told you?”

“Perhaps you should have? Given you’re the boss?” the boy spat.

“Quiet,” they both said. Kitty sighed again.

“Zach was abducted by Daken –”

“I was not!” the kid protested, outraged. “You didn’t even notice I was gone!”

“- and then Daken used him – his powers – to attack the school,” Kitty continued, ignoring Zach. This must be the thing she’d referred to already, the reason why it had taken a concerted effort to finally make her agree to help Daken. So, his son had attacked the school – again – and kidnapped a kid – again. So he hadn’t changed that much, had he? Logan deflated. He’d thought – Laura had seemed so sure. Adamant, really. She saw the best in Daken, she thought him capable of change.

Had Daken simply tricked her? Logan’s funeral, him helping her for whatever Kitty had mentioned too – was it all a ruse to use Laura for something?

“Daken wasn’t really himself,” Kitty offered quietly, unexpectedly. Logan looked up at her. She was grimacing, but she seemed determined to set this straight. He felt a surge of gratitude, hope blossoming in his chest again.

“What do you mean?”

“Death Seed, yo,” Zach piped up. “God, that shit was nasty.” He shuddered.

Oh. Oh, but of course – Daken had been revived by the Apocalypse twins; Laura had mentioned it too…

Logan felt the blood drain from his face. “You mean he’s still infected?” He turned to the door. And they’d left Laura alone with him?

“Bobby took care of that.” Kitty sighed. “Long story short… the Seed was acting up, and Daken was trying to find a way to control it – to escape its control, really, Bobby said. He was using Zach to counter-attack it somehow – Zach can amplify and dampen people’s powers. Bobby blocked the Seed permanently, though, so no worries there. And he –” she tapped a finger against her lips. “He insists that Daken can’t be held responsible for what he did under its influence, or else we should hold him accountable for when he turned the world into a snowball too.” She shrugged. “I think he might even have let Daken go.”
“And Daken left me here,” the boy muttered, dejected. It disturbed Logan to hear him so hung up on this. He’d been kidnapped, after all, and yet – the power dampener, Kitty’s choice of words, his own protests – they seemed to imply a choice on the kid’s part. But Logan had already seen Daken try to convince a boy to use his powers for evil purposes, and so he was left wondering if Daken had forced this kid too. He seemed bewitched, like he had Stockholm Syndrome. He didn’t want to hear the answer, but he had to ask.

“Did – did he hurt you, kid?”

“Jeez, no!” Zach snapped. “Why does everyone ask me that? Seriously!” he spat. “You people are insane. He was amazing. He didn’t kidnap me, he rescued me from these idiots that didn’t even notice I was gone,” he repeated his early accusation. “And when he got all strange because the Seed was trying to – dunno, take over?” He craned his neck to look at Logan with a determined glint in his eyes. He seemed to be wanting Logan to get what he was saying, so Logan gave him his utmost attention. He deserved that, at least. “When that happened, he sent me away. Or he flung himself into this room he’d had made, that was like, impenetrable. And it could only open from the outside, meaning I got to do it, and only if I sensed the Seed had receded! He never lay a finger on me, okay? And I’m worried, because he was good and he left all al-alone,” he sniffled, although he seemed to be soldiering through it, pretending he wasn’t crying, “and these suckers say I’m acting out and he’s a bad influence and now he’s here and he’s hurt and they don’t even tell me how bad is it! How is he? Please tell me, come on,” he pleaded with a final whine.

Logan would have told him, really. He deserved at least that. Logan agreed with Kitty and whoever was in charge of the kid’s probation that Daken, even if he hadn’t ‘laid a finger on him’, had nonetheless preyed on him; and yet the fact remained that he’d been under an outside influence but had managed to restrain himself, favoring the kid’s well-being. He’d treated him well. The kid cared for him. Surely he deserved to at least know how Daken fared?

Too bad he didn’t know what to tell the boy.

Gritting his teeth, he made a decision. “Want to see for yourself?”

“Absolutely not!” Kitty exploded. “Logan, you can’t indulge him. You’ll push his recovery back!”

She was right, of course. The boy was fixated. And yet – he was also a hurt, angry kid desperately trying to reach out. And Logan didn’t want to cause another bitter descent into blind rage, if he could help it.

“I’m gonna be there, ready to walk him out. Trust me on this, Kitty. I know what I’m doing.”

She pursed her lips – but eventually she gave him a curt nod. “I am going to hold you responsible, Logan.”

“Seems right.” Logan nodded back. “Just prepare yourself, kid. He’s... not well.” He looked down. Zach had gone quiet at Logan’s proposal and throughout his exchange with Kitty; he still hadn’t said a word. He was gazing up at Logan with fear and hope – then they got replaced by that earlier resolution.

“Yeah, okay. Lead the way, teach.”

Logan took a deep breath, and went to open the door.

And found hell within.
Next: the asset crumbles.

[So, after *Iceman* last year, Zach disappeared from Marvel comics – until earlier this month, when he showed up on *Typhoid Fever: Spider-Man*. However, I’m not going to work that into the fic, as it’s a really shitty deal for the poor boy *and* it doesn’t make sense either, implying Zach disappeared and was put in a horror mental hospital by someone for... reasons, I guess? (Sorry for the spoilers.) So I’m not going to use that. The power dampener is canon, however. A throw-away line at the end of *Iceman* #10 informs us of it.

I think Logan is going in the right direction, don’t you? Let’s hope he doesn’t mess things up :P Let me know what you think! Your comments keep me going ^_^]
The asset knew why his previous masters reset him.

Or at least, that was what he supposed happened, why he didn’t remember the things one of them had said. He must simply get reset every once in a while.

And that was because he’d get crazy. He’d get crazy and begin to hear a voice in his head, this strong urgent voice, and so he harmed people. Or he turned his claws against himself, ruining the merchandise. So his masters would reset him, and then he came back sane, not remembering anything.

He’d tried to explain this to the handler, the woman who was staying with him in the cell. He’d tried to explain it to the mistresses too. If they reset him, he’d be as good as new, ready to target whoever they wanted. But the mistresses all said that he had no mistress, and no master. That he was a free man. And the handler repeated it, firmly, all the times he told her.

The voice agreed. The voice said they were better off dead. Better dead than a slave.

It was becoming louder and clearer, and the asset was scared of that. What would happen when it got so strong it suffocated his own thoughts? He couldn’t harm himself – the handler got in the way, since she was holding him tightly, and despite his best efforts, he was possessed by the urge to cling to her too. And the voice – the voice knew her. It called her Laura. It called out for her often, but the asset still had control of his voice.

The asset didn’t know what to do. He didn’t even understand what was happening inside his mind. Was it the voice that made him want him to hurt himself? Or was it him, acting out in response, trying to counterattack the voice? The voice swung between saying it wanted to die and calling for help.

It wasn’t a conversation. He wasn’t talking with it – but it seemed to respond to what he thought.

One of the not-mistresses had said that his mind was hurt, and that they’d help. Were they going to free him from the voice? And yet, the not-mistress’ presence made the voice stronger.

So he waited until she left. He waited for the little girl – the one the voice said he couldn’t hurt – to be gone as well. He waited until they were completely alone, until some time had passed and he knew no one was going to return and it was just him and the handler, huddled together on a bed, in that room with impenetrable glass reinforced by metal. He waited, then he asked the handler.
“Are you going to make the voice go away?”

The handler

[Laura]

stilled, her breathing changed for a moment. Then she asked, quietly: “What does the voice tell you, Daken?”

The asset hesitated. Should he tell her? She wanted to help, didn’t she? It was just that he didn’t know what she meant by that. But he trusted her. Didn’t he? Or was it the voice, telling him to trust her? Should he even do what the voice said?

[God yes please Laura please help me. Help me.]

“Help,” the asset found himself saying. “The voice asks for help.”

She caressed his hair. “We’ll help, Daken. Have faith. It’s going to be all right soon.”

[When when when is it going to be all right it’s not going to be all right I’m trapped here I can’t be used again I won’t be used again you’ll kill me if I stay like this promise me promise me promise me]

“Daken?” The handler moved back a bit, her gaze studying him. Judging by the sway in his vision, the asset was rocking back and forth. Her concerned face came closer and then away, closer and then away. It was the voice, controlling his body. Or himself, fighting against the voice. He didn’t know. He didn’t know. “Daken, what’s wrong?”

“Kill me,” his mouth moved on its own. He bit his tongue, but the words kept coming. “If I stay like this, kill me –”

[I know you will I know you I trust you I know you’ll do what needs to be done]

The handler

[Laura, it’s Laura]

paled, her arms tight around him. “You’ll be fine, Daken. It’s going to pass, we’re sure of it. Your healing factor is taking care of it as we speak, I promise you’re going to be all right.”

[but if I don’t, if I stay like this, a slave a weapon a puppet you need to kill me, to kill me to end it, I won’t be used again, I will not -]

“- be used again,” he was saying, chanting really. He smelt his own blood in his mouth, its tick texture, but he couldn’t stop his lips, his teeth, his tongue from forming vowels and consonants. It was the voice, the voice was taking over –

“Daken, it won’t happen. It’s going to be all right, you’re going to get better soon, do you hear me? I won’t need to kill you, because you’re going to come back to me. To us. Do you hear me, Daken? Do you understand?” The handler

[It’s Laura!]

was speaking slowly, clearly, so that he’d hear her, that he’d pay attention to her. But how could he do that, when something, something was taking over and he couldn’t stop it, he could only

[roll over and take it like a trained dog, I won’t allow it, I won’t let anyone use me, you won’t let
them do this to me, you will put me down, you’ll do what needs to be -]

“- done, promise me, promise me, promise me, promise me, promise me –”

“Daken, stop!” The handler

[it’s my sister and her name is Laura!]

held him tightly, her breath labored. He could feel her muscles flexing under the strain of keeping
him still as he tried to roll over, to overcome her. His body was taut, his claws itching to come out to
fight… he didn’t know what threat. He was floating in uncertainty and resolution and pain, so much
pain, and he knew he wouldn’t be used, he would not be used, not again –

“What’s happening here?” A bellow resonated in the room. He winced, not knowing why, and the
handler

[that’s my sister, my sister, Laura, her name is Laura]

managed to overwhelm him, pushing him until he lay on his stomach. She was straddling him, her
palms manacles around his wrists, cold metal against his face – he was on the floor. They’d fallen off
of the bed. He didn’t like that position, the vulnerability, the hot weight over him –

[it’s Laura, it’s just Laura, just her, it’s just her]

He didn’t like it and he struggled, but she was strong. “I think it’s wearing off,” she panted, “It’s
wearing off, and he’s reaching out, and he –” She let out a sound. It was short and wet and it made

[I’m sorry, you’re the only one, the only one who’s ever -]

“- seen me.”

“It’s all right,” she said quietly. “I understand.”

That same sound came out of his mouth.

“He what?” The voice from before. “Laura, what’s happening? Did he hurt you?”

[typical]

“No.” The handler

[Laura]

raised her voice. “He’s in pain, Logan. He’s in there and he feels there’s something wrong, he feels
the shackles. He’s afraid. But it’s all right,” she added, her voice nearer. She must have lowered her
head. “You’re going to be better soon, Daken, I promise. The telepaths are on their way, they’ll help
y-”

[don’t let them touch my mind don’t let them don’t don’t don’t]

“Daken, calm down! It’s all right!” She was panting with exertion, again. He was wiggling as much
as he could, trying to shake himself free, a panicked arrow straight through his throat, a manic, frantic
terror, a certainty:

[no telepaths no telepaths no telepaths in my mind no no no no]
“Logan, stay there, your scent will upset him.”

“Mine won’t.”

“All right, but be careful, he’s –”

“I’ve dealt with Logan before. I know how they can get. Good thing I’m intangible, yes?”

“… Thank you.”

Other hands on him. It was the woman he couldn’t touch, one of the not-mistresses. She was holding his legs. He was trapped. He was trapped.

“Easy. Easy, it’s all right. They’re on their way. They’ll help. We’ll help.”

[I don’t need their help, no telepaths, no telepaths, I won’t let you, won’t let you -]

“- do this to me –”

“Whoa. He doesn’t like telepaths, does he?”

“With good reason.” The handler

[Laura, it’s Laura, please don’t do this to me, please, please, please]

moved over him to better hold him down. “Daken, I understand. I get it. But they’ll help, I promise. Do you trust me?”

[with my life. With my -]

“ – life.”

Wet sounds booming all around them.

“Logan, please get a hold of yourself.”

“He’s… he said… he trusts you –”

[making it all about him, of course, freshly returned but of course nothing changed, he’s always the same maddening, stupid, infuriating, with his tears, as if he had a right, he had no right, he had -]

“- no idea –”

“I know, son.” The male voice came softly, drumming against his eardrums. ‘I’ll be better. I promise. I’ll listen. I’ll be there for you. I’m here for you.”

[don’t make promises you can’t keep, old man. Don’t say you’ll stay because you won’t, you don’t, you don’t ever -]

“- stay.”

He felt drained. Pained and drained and so, so tired. He ached and there was something in his throat that hurt him so, a constriction in his lungs. A… sadness? He was sad. Exhausted. Disillusioned.

He was being let down. He was trapped, suffocated, betrayed. He didn’t know – he didn’t know what he wanted, because the voice was strong now and gave orders to his body and his body obeyed. He was feeling – he felt what the voice felt, what he thought the voice felt – what it
He’d be erased, and there was nothing he could do. He’d lose himself, disappear –

[that’d be good. Just go. I was never mine anyway. This is a travesty. Ridiculous. Leave me alone -]

“Kitty, we’re coming in!”

It was a voice he’d heard before. One of the not-mistresses? The one that made the voice stronger. She wasn’t alone, there were other two scents.

“Give him space, I have him.”

The pressure left, but he was still glued to the floor. He moved – not his body, it wasn’t the voice, it wasn’t himself – he wasn’t controlling his body, it was something else moving his body, arranging him on his back. He gasped, alarmed, tried to flail, but his muscles didn’t respond. People – people around him, serious faces, soft gazes…

[telekinesis. Fucking telekinesis, the telepaths, it’s the telepaths, get them out, I don’t want them, I don’t want them, I don’t want them!]

[‘Daken?’]

[‘Daken.’]

“Easy now. Steady.”

[Leave me alone!]

“He’s resisting. He’s – so much pain…”

A hand grasped his. “I’m here, brother.”

[‘Daken, it’s all right. My name is Jean. These here are Rachel, and Betsy. You’re safe. We’re going to ease you back –’]

[Get out get out I don’t want telepaths I don’t want you leave me -]

“- alone, leave me alone –”

“He doesn’t want you!” a voice exploded. His heart gave a stutter… a sense of immeasurable shame. “Get out and let him – I dunno, leave him alone, can’t you see he doesn’t want your help?”

“His mind is knitting itself together,” a female voice explained. “It could hurt like hell. It will hurt like hell. We’re here to avoid that.”

“He’s fragmented.” Another female voice. “Floating. A bundle of broken thoughts, and we can guide him back to himself –”

“But he doesn’t want you to do that! Jeez, it seems clear to me!”

“Zach, you need to leave. It’s way past curfew.”

[Zach? Zachary? Zach?]

“Don’t you dare pull that shit, teach! I’m staying, fuck! It’s not right, what you’re doing isn’t right –”
Voice cracked by tears that wouldn’t spill. He was strong, he’d show he was good, he was worthy, he was brave. He could do anything he told him to do. He was a good boy, he’d make him proud. He’d be so proud –

[‘Look, he’s –’]

[‘Yes. Get ready.’]

[‘Oh, God.’]

He’d show him … he’d show him he was worthy of his attention of his love of his pride. He just had to stop crying –

He rolled his eyes. There, at the edges of his vision, a kid staring at him, pale and worried, sniffling back tears. A kid he’d wronged. He’d turned him into himself, he’d turned himself into him, like looking into a distorted mirror, and he’d never, never forgive himself for that, never…

I’m so sorry, Zach. I’m –

“- sorry.”

Something slot into place, blinding him, his brain on fire, his mind on fire, a cacophony in his ears, his eyes his nose his mouth, pain, so much pain, he could take it he’d always taken it never show it hurts never show the toll never scream never cry never shake never never never never

‘Daken? Daken?’

‘Can you hear us?’

‘Daken?’

‘Daken? Follow our voices!’

Daken, yes. That was his name. Forged in blood and tears and pain. Tempered with hot irons and chafing ropes and need. Hammered with every hit, every crooked smile, every biting caress. With sharp nails and canines and eyes made of nothing. Every inch of him claimed, his mind a plaything. His unconditional love, taken for granted and discarded. Malice slithered inside him like a disease, corruption of the worse kind, a young boy taken in and molded like the ghost who made him shudder every time he closed his eyes.

Did he really deserve salvation, when he’d wronged a kid just a little older than he’d been?

He slid away. Further, further… into the waiting darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Laura takes matters into her hands.

[Just a bit of clarification, because Daken’s thoughts are jumbled and confusing here, and it might read as something else: the “past rape” tag doesn’t apply to Zach.]
I hope this chapter wasn’t too emotionally draining! Remember to always check the warnings, and feel free to hop off the train anytime… I’ll understand ^-^ ]
Laura takes matters into her hands.

Chapter Notes

Additional Warning: suicidal behavior.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

13.

Something was wrong.

Daken had stopped writhing on the floor, and now he lay motionless, his eyes staring lifelessly at the ceiling. He was still breathing, and his hand was warm, his blood still flowing, his heart beating steadily – those things should quench Laura’s worry, should make her ascribe his state to the fact that he was in the process of recreating his mind from the mess the chemicals had made of it.

But the telepaths’ faces told another story. Their frantic heartbeats, the crease of concentration on their foreheads, the utter panic that contorted for a moment Rachel’s features before the woman took a hold of her expression… Something was very, very wrong. Laura looked from telepath to telepath, hoping for an explanation or a reassurance, but their eyes were as vacant as Daken’s, though alive – their effort clear.

“What’s happening?” she asked, wondering if they could even hear her – her question drowned by the far more demanding and deep voice of Logan.

She glanced up at him. He stood frozen behind the glass, where he’d confined himself, for his scent would trigger Daken. She feared there was nothing to trigger anymore, and then bit her tongue at her negative thought. She had to believe all was well. She had to believe all would solve.

“What’s happening?” she repeated. Logan was ashen, the lines on his face stark and deep with worry; his feverish gaze fixed on the still body of his son.

“Kitty, what’s happening?” he breathed. The woman, who’d moved away when the telepaths had closed in on Daken, stood near the boy – Zachary – a hand still on his arm from when she’d tried to make him leave. Her brow was knitted as she studied the scene before her. Laura shifted slightly, and checked Daken’s pulse with her free hand even though she could hear his heartbeat. It was slow, as if he were in a deep slumber.

“I don’t know,” Pryde said quietly. “I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about –”

She couldn’t possibly believe her own words.

“Is he okay?” the boy’s quivering voice made Logan wince. He tore his eyes away from Daken and stared vacantly at him, then back at his son. “Is he – he…” Zachary sniffled.

“He told you he was sorry,” Logan said suddenly, his voice cracking. “He told you he was sorry and then he went all crazy –”
He had. A few long, agonizing moments of witnessing her brother writhe and move his jaw as if he wanted to scream but wouldn’t, her hand firm and comforting around his – and then he’d stilled.

Daken’s voice had sounded far more wrecked as he apologized to the boy, than during all the broken half-sentences that he’d managed to push past his bloodied lips until that moment.

She’d done her best not to be affected by anything that forced its way out of his mouth, his mind struggling to tear off the web that trapped him inside the puppet. She’d controlled herself, because any distraction meant doing him a disservice, and she had to keep him safe. So she’d steeled herself as he begged her not to bring telepaths in, for she knew it was for his sake; she’d clench her jaw, tears threatening to spill, as she told him things he’d never dared to, no words ever needed between them. She knew he trusted her, just as she trusted him; but to hear him say so, knowing he’d never have said it had he been in control of what he was saying – that was, in itself, a breach of his privacy. ‘You’re the only one who’s ever seen me,’ he’d murmured, so quietly.

He was a reserved creature, and this was a violation. It would save him – she had to believe it would – but it was, nonetheless.

And then it had gone even worse. Had he been self-aware, he’d have never found himself around Zachary in the first place – but he was here, although not quite, and so he’d apologized. And from the lost look in Zachary’s eyes, she knew that the boy had no idea why, nor could he fathom why Daken’s voice had been so wrecked.

The truth was that Daken was consumed with a terrible sense of shame about the boy’s kidnapping. And she’d seen the worst of it: after Daken’s attack at the school, she’d tracked her brother down. She’d defended him in front of the X-Men, of course, knowing already about the Death Seed, knowing he’d been worried about its influence – but then she’d gone after him, both to check on him and to ascertain that the threat was truly gone. She’d found him in one of his safehouses, one of those she knew about: a telltale sign that he wanted to be found, even though he tried to chase her away the moment she walked in. He was in a horrible state, unkempt and aggressive, reminding her of his worst days on Mystique’s plane.

He was pale, and remarkably tight-lipped, but she had managed to ascertain that he regretted the kidnapping immensely. As far as she could tell, he hadn’t hurt the boy, but that hardly mattered to him. He’d – his voice had lowered to a grief-stricken whisper – he’d been training the boy. That such training simply meant camping in the woods and teaching self-control techniques hardly mattered, as well, when those things had been tinged – looming in the background, tasting like acid in his mouth, always ready to spring like a deadly disease – by the darkness of the Death Seed. The training hadn’t gone to entail bootcamp or the worst things he’d never told her, but it could have happened in a heartbeat, and he despised himself for not being able to counter the influence of the Death Seed, for dragging the boy into it, for almost, almost, recreating the patterns of his own abuse.

Not that he’d used that word. He never did. But he didn’t need to either. She had eyes.

“You did fight back,” she’d told him then, quietly. But he wasn’t listening, his eyes alight with a feverish, self-loathing glint. “You fought the Death Seed, and Zachary didn’t get hurt.”

“But he could have.”

_He could have_. That thought was poison in Daken’s mind, and though she’d eventually managed to return him to a sort of functionality, she hadn’t been able to dispel that niggle, horrifying certainty. Muramasa had been wrong, or rather not entirely right, when, weeks later, he’d told Daken that his healing factor was held back by his guilt regarding Logan’s death. There was another guilt that ate at him, deeper and sharper; and the meditation that had eventually allowed Daken to be ready for
Muramasa’s task hadn’t truly healed him from it. Evidently, it had just pushed it all under a carpet – ready to get out again at the slightest reminder. So strong that it had reached Daken even despite the chemicals in his brain.

Otherwise, Daken wouldn’t have sounded like that, right now. He wouldn’t have sounded like he was choking on his words.

And she didn’t like the succession of events. The apology had been followed by something that was clearly hurting him, judging by the way his body had contorted and the hitch in his breath. He hadn’t screamed, but that didn’t mean anything. And then, after a few long, terrible moments, there had come the silence, and the stillness.

She didn’t like this silence, nor the telepaths’ expressions. She didn’t like the way herself and the non-telepaths all waited for something to happen, too shocked and worried to do otherwise. Logan couldn’t avert his eyes, nor could Zachary. And Laura – she felt useless like this, her hand tightly holding Daken’s in a mockery of comfort. What good could it do, when they didn’t even know what was happening in his mind, or the reason of this wretched silence -?

Jean’s breathing changed and Laura immediately turned her attention to the woman. Her gaze was clear and she was blinking quickly, her eyes darting between Laura and Logan. “I’m afraid he’s letting go,” she said softly.

Laura’s chest tightened painfully. She should have known.

“What do you mean, letting go?” Logan cried out. “Do something!”

“We’re holding him together,” Jean murmured. “But that won’t be enough. He needs to want to come back, and –” She trailed off, shutting her eyes for a moment.

“You said you’d help him,” Logan choked out. “You said –” He shook his head, and he gritted his teeth, and he came into the room. There was no need to worry about his scent anymore. He approached quickly, but haltingly, and fell to his knees beside Daken. “Son? Can you hear me?” Hesitantly, he laid out a hand, grabbed Daken’s own. He held it reverently, as if he hadn’t ever touched his son kindly, or he’d never been allowed to.

Laura knew that to be the case. She knew Daken must have never let him. Always fighting, always angry. Always so lost.

He needs to want to come back. And he didn’t want to.

There must be something she could do. Something to make him see he was needed, and loved, and cared about. Something to show him there was still so much to live for –

“Son?” Logan was still trying to get through to him. “It’s gonna be all right. I’m here, son. I’m here for you. Please come back –”

But no answer came, and Jean still hadn’t said how could they fix this, as if there was no way to. But Laura couldn’t believe it possible. She refused to give up. She couldn’t forgive herself if she didn’t at least try; she could never look Gabby in the eyes if she let this happen.

She tried to meet Jean’s eyes, but the woman was looking intently at Zachary. The boy was crying quietly, silent tears streaming his face; Pryde had let go of his arm, and looked like she wanted to embrace him but didn’t dare to, knowing that would be met with fury.

Why was Jean looking at the boy? Had Laura’s instincts been right? Had he something to do with
Daken’s decision? Had Daken’s shame won out, polluting his will to live?

Not that he’d been that positive to begin with, begging her to kill him if they didn’t manage to bring him back. Laura felt a lump in her throat. There had to be some way! Why couldn’t she do as with Logan – acting as an anchor of sorts, helping the telepaths, helping Daken himself?

“We can try that, yes,” Jean said, answering to her thoughts. Logan stopped his litany and looked up at the telepath.

“What? What can you do?” he panted, hope in his tear-filled eyes. “Please tell me you can help him. Please –”

“We’ll do our best, Logan.” Jean smiled sadly. “I can’t promise more than that.” Logan nodded, wide-eyed and white-faced, his lips a thin line. Jean turned her attention to Laura. “This will be more difficult, Laura. You can’t slip like you did with Logan.”

“I won’t,” she said simply. “Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.”

Jean cocked her head –

And they were elsewhere, trapped in a slick darkness not too dissimilar from the one they’d encountered in Logan’s mind. This felt different, though. Sharper, full of intent and malice. A cold void that made her skin crawl. She burned with the need to see, to turn up the light, to flood the black with blazing white. To show Daken life. To bring him back –

Stop that. Something warm on her arm. Jean’s voice, beside her.

It’s swarmed with traps. We’re taking care of it; don’t try anything on your own.

I’m not doing anything, she protested.

You’re trying to reach out, Jean said. You’re untrained, and it will hurt if you persist. A shard of telepathy isn’t enough to fight against this.

A shard -? Laura shuddered. So it wasn’t her imagination, that strange feeling that sometimes itched at the back of her mind. Had Sophie left something behind… a part of herself?

She did, Jean said simply. It’s not enough to actively use telepathy – but it gives you an edge. It’s why you were able to influence the reception with Logan, and we hope it will work here too.

I see. She wondered if this was the case for Gabby too – if Esme had left something inside her. The thought was disquieting; but Jean would have said, and acted promptly, if that was the case. These traps? she asked, returning to the matter at hand.

They’re peculiar, and very complex, Jean said distantly. Laura got the feeling that the woman wasn’t truly with her – she must be miles away, battling against the darkness, together with Rachel and Braddock. It was a thorough work that put them here. They’re embedded in him, but they’re not what I’m worried about. We can sidestep them easily –

You want to leave them there? Laura asked, vibrating with disbelief.

They’re part of him, Jean explained patiently. A disgusting violation, but they’re also the reason why Daken was able to resist to a degree. We certainly can’t touch them while his mind is still shattered. If we succeed, and if he lets me, I’ll see what I can do about them, but for now it’s not our priority.

Of course not. The priority was to bring Daken back. You said – he’s letting go.
Yes, I’m afraid so. Jean squeezed her arm. You know about Zachary.

Yes -? If there had been air around them, Laura would have taken a shaky breath at that. So she’d been right – or perhaps she’d sensed it, thanks to Sophie’s “gift” to her: Daken’s current state had something to do with the boy.

That’s correct. Warmth engulfed her; Jean was embracing her protectively, or so it seemed, as they slowly vibrated, seemingly moving away, or towards something – psychic signatures, perhaps? Before he let go, Daken was in the process of knitting himself together. And he was rebuilding his sense of self around Zachary; he felt – he feels – in some ways, akin to the boy. It was unfortunate that he noticed Zachary just as the chemicals wore out of his system; I was hoping to build on his relationship with you. It felt more balanced, even at the facility. Overwhelmingly positive. We’ll have to see what we can do with it now. I’m hoping we can still use you.

Wait. Laura hesitated. He was returning? But then what happened –? She understood even before Jean answered. She recalled, again, the bags under his eyes when she’d found him, freed from the Death Seed; his vehemence, and the absolute self-loathing.

Exactly, Jean said softly. He lost himself in his guilt, and in the ghosts of his past, until he deemed his continued existence a slight. If we hope to bring him back, Laura, we need to show him nothing’s unsolvable. You need to show him you care for him.

I do, Laura said firmly. I do. And others besides. Gabby, and Logan – God help him, their father was trying. He was there for Daken. I’ll show him.

Good. A small flicker in the warmth around her. We might see things you know nothing about, Laura. You’ll have to stay sympathetic, and nonjudgmental. Do you think you can you do that?

Laura felt a small twinge of irritation. Of course she could. He was a half of her; they were bound by more than mere blood. They knew the cruelty of man, and resilience, and horrors the likes of which few had seen. They were survivors.

He’s my brother, she said instead. Lead the way, Jean. I’m prepared.

‘I trust you with my life,’ Daken had said. Well, Laura would see that that trust was well placed.

So she followed Jean. They stepped out of the void – out of the delicate, monstrous framework – and into the recesses of Daken’s mind.

To find him, and bring him home.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Daken makes a decision.

[I hated how Sina Grace had Daken act towards Zach. It’s canon that he was influenced by the Death Seed, but Grace didn’t explore all the ramifications. There were some panels that really made me shudder with the Romulus parallels, and I think that once the Death Seed was gone, Daken must have dwelt on it. Sadly canon didn’t provide us with this, so I took it upon myself.
The Sophie-Shard is *kind of* canon. We still haven’t seen how that will affect her on the long run; for now it’s just a sort of presence that Laura feels sometimes. Let me know what you think! Your comments brighten my day ^^-^- }
Daken makes a decision.

Chapter Notes

**Additional warnings**: Self-harm, suicidal thoughts, self-hatred, implied fratricide.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

14.

It was a strange setting they found themselves in.

A sort of library, barely lit by a sick, shaky light. The walls were stacked with scrolls; the air smelt of humidity and mold and dust. Laura felt a weight in her chest, an oppression. The room was large and ancient and completely deserted. Where was Daken?

*Quite a collection*, Braddock murmured from her right. Laura turned to see her and Rachel too, the both of them materialized beside her and Jean. *What might these be? Memories? Or –* The woman laid out a hand, brushing her fingertips against a wooden roller. She jerked minutely, a gasp falling from her lips.

*What?* Laura reached out to do the same, but Rachel grabbed her wrist.

*Not now*, she said. She was pale, her eyes wide and alert. A hint of nausea tinged the lines around her mouth.

*Rachel, Jean said softly, you think you can stay?*

*Yeah*. Nodding grimly, Rachel let go of Laura’s hand. Laura let it fall to her side, her eyes darting between the scrolls. Her insides churned, but she was a guest here; she wouldn’t deconsecrate more than she had to.

*What should we do?* she asked, turning to the telepaths for directions.

*Call out to him*, Jean said simply. *Our voices mean nothing to him, but yours was a beacon even while he was trapped.*

*And if he doesn’t answer?* Laura grimaced. He was still trapped, after all. Differently – manacled by himself, lost – but still trapped.

*We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, Laura*. Jean smiled in encouragement. *Call him.*

*Very well*. Laura stood at the center of the aisle and called out to her brother. She infused all her love in her voice; all the things that came to her mind, images of comfortable domesticity and tentative bonding. Gabby’s smile, and her delighted laughter, and her pout that always melted Daken’s resolve. And she recalled their own trials, and their shaky start, that had found them clashing but ultimately in agreement. The way he’d shouted her name as she fell to the ground, drained by Siphon; his support after she faced her mother’s clone. His gift of a body to grieve her mother. Kneeling beside him in front of the urn containing their father’s remains. Seeing him touch reverently
the small portrait he’d painted of his mother. Sitting at his bedside on Mystique’s plane, day after
day, talking of nothing, trying to keep him alive. Grabbing his hand as he gritted his teeth and spoke
with a dead voice and recounted what he’d done. Every scene, every image, every shining memory
impressed upon her voice, her call, her plea.

*I love you, brother. I’m here. Please answer. Come back to me. Come back, Daken.*

And eventually, something answered.

A spark, at the end of the isle. Laura broke off, her heart leaping to her throat. She started in its
direction, hope blooming in her chest, and felt the telepaths beside her as they all moved towards it.
She felt – a sort of pull. Faint, but luminous, and tangible.

*Laura*, Jean said, something abrupt in her voice giving Laura pause. *This is merely the kernel he
managed to build before he let go; it’s not all of him. He might be different*, she warned.

But Laura was prepared. She’d face anything that came her way; anything they found at the end of
the tunnel.

It was the blood that hit her nostrils first. Strange as it was, in this place where senses didn’t need to
work, she could still smell exceptionally well. And she smelt blood.

She covered the rest of the distance in a few long strides, her heart hammering in her eardrums. She
sensed, before actually seeing them, the paths crisscrossed on his arms, because there was a time
when she’d drawn them on her own.

*Daken!* She fell to her knees beside the form propped up against a bookcase and caught, as gently as
she could, the claws violating the tender flesh of his forearm. *Daken? It’s me. Laura.*

*You shouldn’t be here.* Despite everything – the terrible situation, the ordeal they’d faced, her worry
– she almost laughed in relief at hearing his voice, so close, so matter-of-fact… as if nothing out of
the ordinary was taking place, as if he was scolding her for her taste in clothes, like he would
sometimes.

He’d answered her call, and now he was trying to send her away. That, more than anything else,
gave her the certainty that nothing was lost yet.

*I most certainly should be,* she murmured, firmly pushing his hand away from his arm. He let her, his
head rolling against a shelf with a sigh. A flicker of light reached his face and Laura stilled.

He looked – old. There were wrinkles around his eyes, his skin almost sagged against his
cheekbones, his hair grey. He looked… he looked his age.

He caught her gaze. *Get out, Laura,* he breathed. He sounded exhausted, and her chest ached
painfully. *Leave me here.*

*To hurt yourself?* she said softly. She wasn’t going to relent. She wasn’t going to abandon him. *You
don’t have to, Daken. It’s all good –*

*No, it’s not,* he contradicted her. *It never has been, Laura. It’s a void, swallowing me whole –* the
word vibrated with a hidden meaning, an echo behind it. Straining her ears, she heard the frantic
whisper of a terrified child: *Mu.*

She grasped his hands. *I’m here,* she told him. She felt a surge of approval from behind her – Jean’s,
maybe. She wondered why the telepaths wouldn’t reveal themselves and help her, but Daked had
made it clear he didn’t want them. It appeared this was on her only. I’m here, Daken. You’re not alone; we’ll face everything together. I promise.

You can’t face the void. Daken shut his eyes. There’s something rotten inside me, Laura. Cold and hard and unforgivable. And I won’t ever rid myself of it –

This was about Zachary. About the Death Seed, and his terror. Jean had said he was stuck on that guilt. But you have, she interrupted him, her hands tight around his. Zachary’s safe, Daken. You didn’t do anything to him.

I could have.

But you didn’t. Laura shuffled closer. He looked so frail and old and desperate, a puncture wound in her heart. Don’t measure yourself against what an outside influence made you do, Daken. It wasn’t your fault. And it’s gone now. You’re safe –

But none are from me! he snapped, pulling his hands away – cradling them to his chest. It’s not outside, Laura. It’s in me, a disease, a void in my heart, and he put it there. He shuddered. And I won’t ever, ever rid myself of it. Better stay here. He was rubbing at his chest, and while her first impression was that he was referring to the Death Seed – fearing Iceman’s countermeasure wouldn’t hold, maybe – the way his mouth contorted at saying he, the way the vibration resonated again within her, echoing with that word, Mu, a child’s terror behind it, finally tore the veil.

She cursed her incompetence. Jean had spoken of ghosts of his past, but Laura hadn’t dwelt on it as she was confronted with the shivering, incomplete manifestation of her brother’s mind. But now she saw clearly. Mu: a Japanese word for ‘nothingness’ and thus ‘void’ too, but also a syllable inside the name of the monster in Daken’s closet.

Daken. Gently, she placed her hands over his, lacing their fingers together. He ducked his head, avoiding her gaze, but allowed her this contact. You’re not what Romulus made you into, she said slowly, softly. Daken shuddered.

I’m –

You’re what you made yourself into. She pressed her hands to his. You clawed your way out of his clutches, Daken, and you’re here now. You’re a survivor, not a monster. He tried to make you into one, but he failed.

I was already! Daken shook his head. You don’t understand, Laura. I’m better off dead. I hurt everyone and everything. I hurt you too, and I’ll hurt you again. His voice broke.

He was referring to when he’d sold her to Malcolm Colcord. But that had happened years ago, and they were past that now. She knew him. She forgave him.

I’ll survive, she assured him. I’m a survivor too. I did terrible things too, Daken, but I was made to, just as you were made to. You can’t hold yourself responsible for what he did to you.

Daken laughed. It was long and breathy, a tinge of hysteria in it, his shoulders shaking. I was rotten from the start. He only built on it. The Death Seed only built on it. That’s what I am, deep inside: a monster, Laura.

I beg to differ, she said quietly. You know good from wrong. And when you think on it, you act accordingly. The mere fact that you regret what you did in your life means that you aren’t a monster, Daken. You’re my brother, and Gabby’s brother, and a loving one at that. You’re –
He laughed, again. This time there was an edge, like broken glass in his throat. A loving brother! What kind of loving brother kills his baby brother, Laura?

She was taken aback at that – an edge of alarm crawling under her non-existent skin. Jimmy -?

Jimmy’s safe. Better off possessed than around me. He raised his head, a manic light in his eyes. It was disconcerting to see them set on that old face, to see lines of guilt and weariness upon his skin. Was this how he felt?

Not all the time, a whisper nudged her. It seemed Jean’s voice. This is a facet, Laura. Just what he managed to build. Help him find the rest. The light, too. The happiness.

I don’t know how, she admitted, gazing upon her brother’s eyes. There were ages of pain in them; so much, for so many years, all coming together now. She squeezed Daken’s hands. I don’t know how.

You’re doing great. A gentle breeze against her shoulders. Rachel’s voice. It’s difficult to find one’s own humanity when stripped of it for so long. You know this better than most. And Rachel did too. Perhaps she would be of more help than Laura, being a telepath. Laura was utterly out of her depth here. Perhaps –

Don’t despair. This was Braddock. You are doing great. Keep going. Don’t confront him on his brother, not now. There was something strange in her voice, something Laura sensed faintly. As if Braddock knew something. And after all, hadn’t she brushed her hand against a scroll before? Focus on the rest, Laura. On the good things. On your love.

Yes. Bringing her attention back to Daken, she found him smiling in some sort of deranged, yet oddly peaceful way. Daken?

It’s all right, Laura. He closed her hands into fists, and pressed them against his chest. I know it’s for the best. Kill me here, and I’m sure my body will die too.

I’ll do nothing of the sort! She tried to free her hands, but his hold was firm, despite the old age of this manifestation. But this was his mind – and his rules – and he must retain a modicum of control over it.

No? Isn’t that what you were discussing, in consultations with the telepaths? I know they’re here, he added, and I can only imagine their horror at seeing my mind. It’s all right, Laura. Do it. Put me down, like the rabid dog I am.

You’re no dog! The snarl didn’t come from Laura. It didn’t even come from Rachel, though Laura had half-expected it. No, when the white-hot rage subsided, allowing Laura to see again, she saw Jean kneeling beside Daken. You’re human, she was saying gently. You’re a human being.

So much for not interfering. Braddock sounded mildly amused. Then there was a flicker of alarm. Jean, Rachel’s –

I know. Go. Jean didn’t turn to acknowledge the two telepaths more than that, focusing on Daken. Laura felt them leave, a dull twinge of pain coming from what she thought was Rachel – but then all her attention was on her brother too. He was trying to put some distance between him and Jean, but Laura was in the way, and he collided against her, hissing like a caged animal.

Get out of my mind, witch, he snapped, pressing his back against Laura. She held him gently, hoping the contact would calm him down, but he wasn’t heeding her, all his body turned towards Jean in a defensive position. Either you terminate me, or you leave. You won’t gaze down in pity at the freakshow, I won’t allow it –
No pity. Respect. Jean held out her hands in a pacifying gesture, but she didn’t touch him, likely guessing it would only set him off more. I respect you. You survived terrible things, and you’re still here. Trying to be good. Being a good brother. I want to see you thrive, Daken. I think you deserve it.

Deserve it? Daken barked a laughter. Look around, witch. See for yourself, and then try to say it again.

I will not pry while your mind’s so fragmented, Jean rested her hands on her lap, her clear eyes fixed on Daken. You can’t give me permission, not like this. You’re not yourself.

An ethical telepath. He scoffed. That’s a first.

Jean smiled kindly. I’m hoping one day I’ll be able to show you that a telepath can tread with respect. If you’ll let me. She turned her hands, to show him her palms.

There won’t be a “one day”. I won’t be there. And there was such finality in his voice!

Laura made to speak, but Jean caught her gaze and shook her head. Then she looked at Daken again. I understand you feel this way, Daken. And I respect that. I understand control over your life has been out of your hands for so long, and I won’t stop you, if you truly want to go.

Laura froze. Surely Jean couldn’t mean what she seemed to mean. She couldn’t let Daken die like that! She opened her mouth, but nothing came out of it. Something hard and warm pushed against her mind, begging her to wait.

Jean was a compassionate person – surely she had a plan. This was a bluff, it had to be. Laura resolved to wait it out, but readied herself to intervene if things went south.

Daken seemed as dumbstruck as she was; he’d stopped struggling, and now he peered up at Jean with what seemed like quiet curiosity.

But do you, really? Jean cocked her head. I know you feel that way. But I also know that – with a wide gesture, she encompassed the library – isn’t all of you. In order to make an informed decision, Daken, you’d need to be yourself.

I am myself.

No, you aren’t. You’re a part of yourself, trapped in your mind, focused solely on the bad things. But there are good things, too, Daken. Good memories. You must regain them, before you decide something so drastic.

I thought you wouldn’t pry. Daken’s voice dripped venom.

I don’t need to. Jean smiled gently. I saw you in your sisters’ minds, Daken. I know pain isn’t all you are. I know you’re more. And don’t you want to know that too, before you decide something you’d regret?

My sisters. Daken grabbed Laura’s arm and squeezed. He felt pensive, something reaching out of him; something warm and bright hesitantly touched her very consciousness. She held still, fearing to somehow stop the process Jean had managed to finally get started. And my father? A flicker.

Your father loves you, Jean said clearly. And he’s ready to show you.

I hurt him too.
Yes. You did. Jean nodded. And he hurt you. And you’re not required to forgive him, Daken. Not on my watch.

He laughed. It was an abrupt sound, but that wasn’t what shocked Laura. It was different from before; a short, breathless, delighted laughter, like the ones he graced Gabby with. He felt – yes, he definitely felt lighter against her body; she shifted, searching Jean’s gaze, but the woman didn’t take her eyes off Daken, a smile on her lips.

*I think* – he broke off with a gasp.

*Easy, Jean said. Let them come to you naturally. Don’t pull.*

*I – oh!*

Flickers of light shone through, the bookcases crumbling to dust in a matter of seconds. Something warm and trembling got a hold of Laura and wept, but there was no pain. It touched her, just so, flitting against her, and she opened up, allowing him to feel her affection, to touch upon her memories, upon her love for him. Her forgiveness, and her gratitude, and her worry upon finding out he’d been taken. She saw herself as in a mirror, holding Gabby, the both of them looking back at her with a softness, a warm love in their eyes, and felt a surge of affection and pride and fierce protectiveness. This was how Daken saw them, his memories revealed to her like a gift; this was how her brother felt, this surge of warmth and love filling him where there had once been only despair, leaving him breathless and exhilarated, tightly holding onto her, a spark in his eyes that now peered at her from a youthful visage.

*You came for me. There was still a wonder in his voice that made her guts churn, but at least the darkness had been kept at bay. He was himself again. Torn, but not down. Struggling for the light.***

*I couldn’t leave you here. There was a lump in her throat.*

He shook his head, amusement tinged with sadness in his eyes. *No, you couldn’t.* He turned to face Jean, who stood a few feet away, her long hair flowing in a gust of wind – pink petals trapped amongst her locks.

What now?

Jean smiled. *Now you decide, Daken. Do you want to stay? Or do you want to live?* Are you really going to let me decide? He looked at her with a knitted brow. *No grand speeches about the beauty of life?* I won’t force you to do anything you don’t want to do. Jean held out her hand and waited. Waited for Daken to decide his fate.

And Laura realized with a start that she was right. This one – this decision – was up to Daken alone. She’d grieve if he died, but she couldn’t force her will upon her brother. She’d struggled so much to save him, but she’d been trying to tear him away from monsters and criminals and his own mind – from traps and a negation of himself. But now he was himself, and he ought to make that step. And she ought to respect it.

Daken tilted his head, gazing into the distance. Water murmured nearby, and there was a longing in his eyes – but then he clutched at Laura’s hand. *I think I’ll try that living thing for a while.*

He grabbed Jean’s outstretched hand. *Lead the way, if you will, Ms Grey.*
Next: Logan waits.

[I just have a lot of feelings about Daken and Laura. These two break my heart ç-ç The library appears in the *Heat* arc, where it was an hallucination induced by the drug. Daken was also dying at the time. It stuck with me as a representation of his psyche, and I wanted to give it my own spin. Are you glad Daken’s finally back? Let me know what you think ^-^ ]
Logan waits.

Waiting was the worst part.

It was difficult to sit there, and watch the motionless bodies of his son and his daughter and the telepaths, knowing he couldn’t do anything but wait and trust them to bring Daken back. It was difficult to know Daken was resisting too – that he didn’t want to come back. He was so cold, as if his heart had stopped pumping blood already, but Logan still heard his steady heartbeat. He was so cold, and he looked so lost, there on the cold floor. They hadn’t dared to move him somewhere more comfortable, fearing to disrupt the link with the telepaths, but he was covered by a thick blanket that Gabby had brought to the med bay with a resolute expression on her little face. She half-lay at Daken’s feet now, her head pressed against his legs, and she wasn’t going to leave until Daken woke up, she said.

No one had dared try to get her up; just as no one had dared make the boy, Zachary, leave, even if Kitty started towards him every now and then, a grimace on her face. He was perched atop the bed, hugging his knees and fixing a worried gaze on Logan’s son. He would occasionally mutter to himself – always some variation of “come on, you can do it, wake up, I know you can.”

Logan was reminded of Daken’s broken whisper, his apology to the boy. Whatever Zach felt – he’d looked confused enough when he’d heard it – it was clear that Daken was ashamed about kidnapping the boy. And given he’d once abducted another student without a second thought, this meant that he really was changed. Logan wanted to meet him – this son that had gained some peace of mind. That was so dearly loved by his sisters.

“Come on, son,” he whispered. Behind him, ’Ro squeezed his arm.

The room was cramped. It seemed half the school had decided to come here and wait for Daken to wake up: Jubilee leaned against a wall, Kurt sitting cross-legged beside her – he was taking turns by Logan’s side with ’Ro, so as not to overcrowd his son, who was surrounded by far too many people already. Kitty paced the room, although she’d also left once or twice. Hank had come in to check Daken’s vitals and, after prodding for a while, he’d maintained that the chemicals were out of Daken’s system and it was up to him now. Then he’d left, muttering about needing caffeine.

It was really late. Or early, depending on how one looked at such things. A few hours had passed since Laura’s dive into Daken’s mind, and still there was no change. Logan’s old counterpart broke into yawns every now and then, his old age getting the better of him; but still he stayed in support. He wasn’t that bad, maybe.

Logan shifted, his arm numb, and changed hands, wrapping his fingers around Daken’s. He
supposed he was, in a way, grabbing as much as he could – not knowing if his son would let him touch him if – *when* – he was back. But he’d take a confrontational Daken over a dead Daken any day.

Jean had said that she’d “do her best”, implying there was a very real possibility that Daken wouldn’t return. But Logan wouldn’t – couldn’t – believe that. He had to believe his son would live.

He had to believe there was still a chance.

Zach’s breath hitched suddenly; Logan looked at his son in confusion, because he hadn’t moved, but then he realized that someone else had come to the med bay.

“Still nothing?” Bobby asked from the entrance. Kurt murmured a dissent and the man took a few steps into the room. “Well, damn. I’m sorry, Logan.”

Logan shook his head. “No *sorry*. He’s gonna wake up.”

“Of course,” Bobby said softly. “He’s a strong one, your kid.”

Zach spluttered in what seemed like outrage, “Yeah, you *would* know,” but Logan turned his head, looking up at the man.

“You think?”

“Well, yes.” Bobby rubbed at the back of his neck. “I mean, when *my* Death Seed took over,” he winced, “I almost took over the world. Daken’s – huh – stunt was pretty tame, if you think about it.”

Kitty coughed.

“Well, it’s true.” Bobby shushed her. Then he smiled faintly at Logan. “So I’m sure he’s going to wake up. If that thing didn’t control him, he sure as hell won’t let this end him either.”

Logan started. “Thanks, Bobby.” He ruminated over his next words as Bobby nodded and made to leave the room. “I understand I have to thank you for ridding him of the Death Seed as well.”

Bobby ducked his head. “It was nothing.”

“It wasn’t *nothin’*. You helped my boy.”

“Yes, well -” Why did he smell ashamed?

“Yes, so fucking *heroic,*” Zach piped up. There was a chorus of “*Language!*” but Bobby didn’t join in, wincing instead. “Teach here is such a paragon of virtue,” Zach added pleasantly, laying it on pretty thick.

“Zach –” Kitty began, a clear warning in her voice, but Bobby just shook his head in her direction and she trailed off.

Logan looked from Bobby, who seemed mortified, to Kitty, who pursed her lips, and then to the boy, who was visibly seething. “Care to fill me in?”

Zach beamed. “Yeah, teach. Tell *dad* here how did you try to rescue me the first time! I’m sure he’ll love it.”

There was a story there, and while Logan wasn’t quite sure he wanted to hear it, Zach’s animosity didn’t leave much to the imagination. Logan could guess it just fine: in an attempt to free the boy,
Bobby must have hurt Daken; and Zach, being so attached to his son, saw that as a slight. Bobby’s reaction was more interesting: he smelt really contrite. But he must have done what he thought was best to protect a student, and Logan couldn’t fault him for that, nor take the moral high ground. Not when he’d held down the struggling body of his son until all the air left his lungs.

Still, Bobby seemed about to spill the beans, his mouth contorted in a grimace – but he was interrupted by a sharp cry coming from Rachel.

The room’s attention turned towards her as she came to with a gasp, eyes wide and unseeing. Betsy was next, blinking to awareness and moving to catch her as she fell backwards, grasping wildly.

“Ray!” Kitty was beside them in an instant, panic tinging her voice. She fell to her knees and grasped Rachel’s hands. “Ray, what’s wrong?”

“Help me move her,” Betsy panted as she went to her feet, grabbing Rachel by her armpits. Zach jumped out of the way, allowing them to place her on the bed. She was whimpering and flailing, but seemed to marginally relax as Kitty sat on the bed to wrap her arms around her. Betsy stood by, her eyes fixed on her fellow telepath, likely calming her down.

They waited in silence, not knowing what had happened. Logan, a twinge of dread running down his spine, looked down at his son, but nothing had changed; and both Jean and Laura were still out.

He gazed around again. Kurt had stood up, and now lingered by the bed as well, staring down at their friend. The others hovered where they’d been standing, craning their necks to see. “Mein Gott. What happened?” Kurt asked quietly.

That was what Logan wanted to know as well. But Betsy still paid them no heed, fiercely focused on Rachel, her mauve aura blazing around her.

Eventually Rachel quietened, at least enough to regain some sense of where she was. She grasped at Kitty’s arm as she took long deep breaths, her fingers digging in seemingly painfully, but Kitty didn’t react to that; she merely held her tighter and shushed her softly, her lips brushing against Rachel’s forehead.

Logan had a feeling that he’d missed a hell of a lot more than what he’d been told about the school’s goings. But none of it mattered now; he caught Betsy’s gaze and motioned to his son with his free hand. “What -?”

Rachel sat up abruptly. “We need to help him!” she gasped, trying to haul herself off the bed, but Kitty wouldn’t have it. “Kitty, let me go! I need to –”

“What you need to do,” Betsy said firmly, “is to stay well out of his mind. You shouldn’t have been there in the first place.” She grimaced. “We should have known.”

“But he needs help!” Rachel shouted, wide-eyed. Logan felt his chest ache at such a display of worry towards his son. “No one should call themselves –”

“They’ve got it, Rachel,” Betsy cut her off, her eyes flickering towards Logan for a moment, and Rachel fell silent. A warning, perhaps, so that Rachel wouldn’t betray whatever they’d seen? But Logan was Daken’s father. Didn’t he deserve to know?

Betsy sure looked like she was holding something back, a faint grimace curving her lips. What had they seen? What was happening inside his son’s mind? Logan looked down at his pale face, squeezed Daken’s unresponsive hand. Shouldn’t he know? If this was the last thing he knew of his son, shouldn’t they tell him?
And yet, Betsy had said that they’d *got it*. Logan almost feared the rush of adrenaline and hope that those words instilled in him.

“All right, but some extra help can’t hurt,” Rachel was saying. “Get in there, I’ll be fine.”

Betsy cocked her head. “I don’t think that will be necessary.”

Logan’s heart skipped a beat. Did she mean -?

“Oh!” Rachel gasped. “Oh, you’re right!”

“Fuck, stop being so mysterious!” Zach exploded, perfectly representing Logan’s own frustration. “What’s going on? Is he okay?” He was wringing his hands, so upset he even let Jubilee touch his arm with a comforting gesture.

Both telepaths turned towards the boy. Rachel regarded him with compassion, and even Betsy’s features softened into something resembling sympathy. “It’s up to him,” Betsy said.

“What does that even *mean*?” Again, the boy expressed Logan’s own feelings. He couldn’t speak; there was a lump in his throat, a sort of panicked frenzy he couldn’t dispel. He was hoping, God, he was hoping so hard, but at the same time he was considering the alternative Betsy implied, and fuck, it hurt so much. He felt ungrateful, but not even ‘Ro’s presence at his back was of any comfort to him; and all the people gathered around the room were, suddenly, too much, too much to witness this. If he had to grieve, he wanted to do it in peace. If he had to say goodbye to his son, he wanted to be alone –

Daken’s fingers were moving against Logan’s palm.

Logan’s breath caught in his throat. And he stared, and stared, a bubble of exhilaration pushing against his lips, as Daken’s eyelids fluttered, as color rose to his cheeks; his fingers moved some more, and then his legs, oh – Gabby stirred and pushed herself up, holding her breath as well, and Daken’s fingers jumped, warm and alive in Logan’s hand, and Jean and Laura were waking up, and the room was overcome by a deafening silence, all its occupants sensing the monumentality of what was happening, and Logan stared, and stared, his heart bursting, marginally feeling ’Ro squeezing his arm, and –

Daken opened his eyes. He blinked several times, as if with confusion, but his eyes were alert and his nostrils were flaring – likely taking note of how many people he was surrounded by. His fingers jumped, again, slightly moving back in an attempt to free himself from Logan’s grip, and Logan let go of him with a surge of regret. He didn’t want to impose – God knew he had no idea of how Daken would react to his presence, so close to him, after everything that had happened between them.

Judging from the shapes under the blanket, Laura was still holding Daken’s hand. She was gazing down at him – well. Logan’s heart almost gave way at seeing the affection with which his children regarded each other.

He wet his lips. “Son -?”

No answer but a blink. Resting on his elbow, Daken half-sat up, swaying as he did so. Jean, already at his side, placed a steadying hand against his shoulder, and Daken let her. He turned his head slightly, looking away from Laura and in front of him – and he smiled the softest smile Logan had ever seen, something he’d never dared to hope to witness on his son’s face… certainly not while he was present. “Hey, Honey Badger.”
“Daken!” With a shriek, Gabby flung herself at him. Daken oofed quietly, Laura fretting by his side and admonishing the child to let him breathe, but Daken murmured to let her be and, with some help from both Jean and Laura, sat up fully, wrapping his now free arm around Gabby’s shoulders. The kid bawled and hid her face against his chest, her little fists tight around the blanket.

Daken fluffed her hair. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. Did I scare you?”

Gabby nodded, sniffling loudly. Daken kissed the top of her head. If Logan had died in that moment, he’d have died happy. To see Daken act so affectionately was a balm for his old soul. He gazed upon the pair with longing; Gabby was inconsolable, though with happiness, and Daken patted her hair with familiarity. At some point Logan thought he saw a flicker of alarm in Daken’s eyes, but the next moment his son was cooing the kid.

“Let me see your nose?” he asked her.

Gabby sniffed loudly and shook her head. “It’s – hauhhh – nothing -”

“Let me be the judge of that.” Letting go of Laura, Daken put his hand under Gabby’s chin and gently tilted her head up. Her nose was fine, of course, perfectly healed. Logan had been told what had happened – an accident, and Gabby apparently didn’t even feel pain, but judging from his son’s grimace, he didn’t agree with that estimate.

“See? It’s fine.” Gabby glared at him with tear-filled eyes, daring him to contradict her. Daken shut his eyes briefly, a shadow passing over his face – but then he opened his eyes and smiled and drew her back into his arms.

“Yes, I see that,” he murmured. Gabby hugged him back fiercely, and Daken’s wince didn’t escape Logan’s notice. Perhaps it was time to clear the room and give his son some space to rest.

“You’re really fine?” Zach’s small voice came from far closer than he’d been earlier. Logan had almost forgotten the boy was in the room. He was crouching in front of Daken – he looked like he’d hastily wiped away his tears with a sleeve – and Logan turned towards Kitty just in time to see her move to intervene. He shook his head at her; luckily, she seemed to accept his judgment for the moment, and she sat back on the bed by Rachel’s side.

Daken looked at the boy with regret. It was impossible to miss it, and Kitty must see it too. There was this almost feverish light in his eyes, that resembled the way he’d stared at Zach while still under the effect of the chemicals. “It seems so,” he said quietly.

“You scared me, man.” Zach’s small voice came from far closer than he’d been earlier. Logan had almost forgotten the boy was in the room. He was crouching in front of Daken – he looked like he’d hastily wiped away his tears with a sleeve – and Logan turned towards Kitty just in time to see her move to intervene. He shook his head at her; luckily, she seemed to accept his judgment for the moment, and she sat back on the bed by Rachel’s side.

“No, Zach,” Daken stated clearly. “What I did to you was wrong.” The boy started.

“What? No! What are you talking about?” he said hotly, shaking his head. “They got to you? That’s nonsense, okay -”

“No, Zach,” Daken grimaced. “Listen to –”

“No! You’re being stupid!” the boy’s voice took on a shrill quality. Daken made to speak, but then Jean squeezed his shoulder. He broke off, his head slightly angled towards her.
“Perhaps we can postpone this conversation to when you’ll both be able to sustain it?” she suggested lightly. The implication was that he would be allowed to speak to Zach again – no doubt he’d sprung into this apology now, despite the audience, because he had no idea of what would happen to him. He might sense Kitty’s hostility, that was coming off in waves, despite the fact she was clearly controlling herself. He might even have focused on reassuring Gabby for the same reason; and given he clearly remembered hurting her on accident, he must remember Kitty had threatened to lock him up.

He nodded – and the fact that he was listening to Jean and allowing her to touch him spoke volumes to Logan – and turned to the boy. “Go back to sleep, Zach. It looks like you need it.”

The boy made a face. “But -” His eyes flickered towards Kitty and he even made an aborted motion with his head – as if desperately trying to impart to Daken that she was an enemy.

Daken, however, stayed focused on him. “Sleep’s important, Zach. And I’m safe, see?” He cocked his head towards Laura, who sat beside him. No fool would take her silence and composure to mean she’d acquiesce if something were to happen to him.

He was utterly ignoring Logan, who sat just as close and as protectively. It shouldn’t hurt – he should have known it would happen – but it did.

“Oh, all right.” Sporting an impressive pout, the boy got to his feet. Kitty didn’t seem too pleased to see Zach effectively obeying Daken when it was clear the teachers were struggling to keep a hold on the boy – but Daken’s own grimace as he watched the child go implied she wasn’t alone in finding the whole situation despicable.

Bobby muttered he’d make sure the boy got to his room and made a hasty retreat. Daken crunched his nose in what looked like distaste, but didn’t comment.

When Zach wasn’t in earshot anymore, Daken turned towards Kitty. “Thank you for your assistance,” he said stiffly.

Kitty jumped minutely on the bed – she mustn’t have expected him to be so polite – but then she nodded. “It was our duty.”

Daken hummed. “And what exactly is my status now, Ms Pryde? Am I a prisoner?” Gabby gasped a heated protestation but he shushed her softly, his hands running gently over her back – his eyes never leaving Kitty’s. So he didn’t notice Rachel squeezing her hand, but he surely registered the pause before Kitty answered.

“You aren’t a prisoner,” she said crisply. “Hank recommended rest, and he wants to talk you through what he found in your body. We might have questions, too, regarding the men who had you.” Daken’s eyes turned into slits at the reminder, but then he nodded. “You won’t be confined to this room, you have freedom to come and go, but know you will be monitored.” Daken cocked his head, as if to say ‘obviously’. “You’re welcome to stay until you feel better. After that, we’ll see.”

“Meaning you’ll hand me over to S.H.I.E.L.D. the minute I can stand on my feet?”

“They can try,” Gabby’s muffled cry caused a few nervous chuckles around the room. The tension was palpable – and yet, Logan didn’t dare to intervene.

Kitty shook her head. “No, we won’t be doing that. You have my word.” She clenched her jaw. “Unless you give us cause for it.”

“That’s reasonable.” Daken drummed his fingers against Gabby’s shoulder as he mulled that over.
He exchanged a glance with Laura, who nodded at him, and, perhaps not so surprisingly, with Jean, who smiled encouragingly. Logan fiercely reined in the pang of grief and jealousy. Daken was alive. That was all that mattered. “Then I’ll accept your kind offer of sanctuary, Ms Pryde,” Daken said, returning his gaze to Kitty.

“Good.” She went to her feet. “We’ll get out of your way now. I suppose you want to reconnect.” Her gaze landed on Daken’s left, straight on Logan, but not even then did Daken acknowledge his presence.

“Quite,” he said instead. “And when might I expect Dr McCoy?”

“When his schedule allows it, I’m sure.” Kitty walked past him, followed closely by Rachel and Betsy. The former lingered just enough to smile at him in unmistakable support, but Betsy stared at him pointedly, and then at Logan, her lips thin. She definitely wanted to say something, but Jean spoke cheerfully.

“Let’s go, Betsy. Give them some room.” She squeezed Daken’s shoulder and then she was up, linking her arm with the telepath and effectively dragging her away.

As the room slowly emptied, it was becoming more and more difficult to ignore Logan, but his son was stubborn: he let go of Gabby, and turned to Laura. “Help me up?” he whispered.

He leaned too heavily against her – and against Gabby, who hastened to support him too – for Logan’s taste, but Logan knew what would happen if he touched Daken when his son had his back on him, even if it was to help: it would be seen as an aggression. Logan tried to see the upside, though – if his son wasn’t warily keeping an eye on him, it meant he trusted him a little bit.

Jubilee was the next to go, chatting away that she was glad he was okay and she couldn’t wait to meet him properly when he felt up to it – to which he hummed noncommittally. Then Logan’s counterpart approached and Logan tensed, fearing the worst.

“Glad you’re okay, kid,” the man grumbled, and walked away without waiting for an answer.

“Thank you,” Daken called out. And that was it. The old bastard had gotten more acknowledgment than Logan!

Logan inhaled to speak. ’Ro was gently shaking his arm, and Kurt was in his line of sight and was shaking his head, but Logan couldn’t let it slide. Damn, he’d thought it was enough to see Daken alive and well, he’d even resolved to leave him alone if Daken so decided – but the wound, he found, was still fresh, and he ached for recognition, a gesture, even a single word. He ached to see his son’s eyes, make sure he was fine –

“Get out, please,” Daken said.

He wasn’t talking to Laura or Gabby. He wasn’t even talking to Kurt and ’Ro, the only strangers still in the room. Logan didn’t need to see Laura’s sad gaze or her trying to meet Daken’s eyes to know that Daken was asking him, specifically, to leave – in no uncertain terms.

And yet – he hadn’t shouted. He didn’t even sound angry. He was just asking him, politely, to leave.

Shame took over. He’d resolved to do his best, this time. And he’d do it. He’d leave, because his son was asking him to. And who knew, perhaps Daken would give him a chance, one day.

“Of course, son,” he said quietly. He got up as both his partners congratulated Daken on his well-being, and then moved towards the door. He wouldn’t cry. He wouldn’t turn back and he wouldn’t
cry. Daken was alive: that was all that mattered. Everything else was secondary –

“Logan.” Daken’s voice reached him when he was almost past the door. Logan stilled, didn’t dare to turn around. Perhaps it was easier for them to speak like this. Perhaps he needed the distance too.

“Yes, son?” Would he be able to withstand it, if Daken hurled abuse at him? If he declared he didn’t want to ever see Logan’s face again?

He would have to. He focused on Kurt’s and ’Ro’s warm presence at his side, and waited for the truth.

Daken sighed. “It’s just too much right now. But I’m… glad you’re alive, Logan.”

That wasn’t – it wasn’t a dismissal. It wasn’t hate. It was even more than what Logan had expected to get. His heart burst with happiness. “Me too, son,” he pushed past the lump in his throat. “Happy you’re alive, I mean.”

There was no answer, but there was no need. The seed was planted.

Logan let Kurt lead him out of the room, and allowed himself to hope.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Daken faces a loss. He doesn’t let that stop him.

[There was a lot happening here! It was a big cast ^^” There are a few things in the background, but I won’t focus too much on them during the story, I don’t think. We’re strictly snikt-family oriented ^-^ Daken’s officially back! God, when I started this I didn’t think it would take this much ^^” What did you think? Are you disappointed there wasn’t a conversation with Logan yet? Let me know! Your comments are the reason why I keep writing ^-^]
So, Daken,” McCoy said, perched atop a stool. “How do you feel?”

How did he feel? Like he missed a limb. Like he’d been under the control of others for days, no way of freeing himself, and the gods hadn’t even been merciful enough to let him sit it out, giving him dreadful flashes of awareness. Like seeing his dead father in the flesh and not knowing what to feel, facing the onslaught of memories and sensations he always brought forth in Daken’s mind, especially after being trapped in it, forced to dwell on things he much preferred to leave buried. Like he was marinating in unease.

His sisters had distracted him, for a while. But Gabby was sleeping on her feet and even Laura looked worse for wear, and eventually he’d had to send them to bed. They’d stayed awake for hours, and if he knew Laura, she surely hadn’t rested until she found him. She’d protested, of course.

“Well, let me be a big brother on this one,” he’d told her. “I think you did enough worrying for a decade.”

Smiling, she’d conceded and dragged Gabby with her, the child wanting to sleep in Daken’s large bed. “He needs to rest,” she’d shushed the little one, and Gabby had got quiet.

Not that he’d rested after they were gone. Sleep eluded him, and frankly, he’d rested even too much while he was under. When McCoy finally deigned himself to show up, a little past ten in the morning, he found Daken slowly pacing the room by using every possible surface as support.

“I do need to impress upon you that you’ll regain your strength much faster if you stay on that bed,” had been his way of greeting Daken. With a huff, Daken had complied, and now he sat in a pair of subpar boxers after having suffered McCoy’s checkup, only one question in his mind and no patience for the man’s tricks.


“You tell me, doctor.” Daken crossed his arms. “You prodded me quite a lot.”

“Ah, yes.” McCoy nodded. “From where I’m standing, you do look fine. You’ll probably experience fatigue for a while yet. You understand, I’ve only had one other patient with your... ailment,” he said delicately.

“Go on,” Daken waved a hand.
“Which is why it’s important you tell me how you feel. A cooperative, lucid patient does wonders, you see.”

Of course. “… I feel worn out,” he admitted. “Is it a side effect of this chemical? Did,” he hesitated, “Did Logan experience the same?”

McCoy sighed. “Unfortunately, we can’t be sure. We found him when it had already worn out of his system. A few days, from my estimate.” His grimace piqued Daken’s curiosity, and despite himself, he found himself asking.

“And where did you find him?”

“A bunker. He was left there. He regained his mind slowly and painfully.”

_unlike me_. Well, just another thing to add to the list of what the bastards would pay for.

Had he just implicitly counted Logan amongst his family?

Daken cleared his throat. “This chemical. Pryde said you’d tell me what it was about.”

“At any rate, you’re clean now. Your memories of that time will remain partly hidden, but the effect, the compulsion – that is gone. I still want to monitor you, to make sure; I regularly check Logan too, and so far there haven’t been complications, but you never know.”

“You never know,” Daken repeated dubiously. “This chemical seems precisely calibrated to work on us. _How_ did they achieve that? I know you have one of those bastards around.” In fact, if the man who’d dared to make Daken call him _master_ wasn’t cooperative, Daken would be glad to help.

McCoy must have seen the dangerous glint in his eyes. “Ah, he wasn’t – he was painfully ignorant on that subject. We had him vetted by _two_ telepaths, so he’s not hiding anything.”

“Pity.” Daken would have to pay him a visit anyway. Just to say hello. “You must have a theory.”

“Well,” the man adjusted his glasses on his nose. “My working theory is that they experimented it on Logan until it achieved the desired effect. It’s not like they didn’t have time to spare.”

There was a time when such a thing would have filled Daken with victorious glee, but now he only felt empty and vaguely nauseous.

And he had a nagging doubt – driving him mad – that Logan hadn’t been the guinea pig. But that wasn’t the only thing on his mind.

Having established that McCoy wasn’t nervous around him, and so mustn’t be the one responsible for Daken’s neutering, Daken decided to bring his concerns to him.
“Is there some chance,” he asked slowly, “that this chemical is still affecting my biology? My powers, for instance.”

McCoy sat up straighter, looking alarmed. “It shouldn’t, no.” He leaned closer, as if peering at Daken’s eyes could give him an answer. “Why? What are you experiencing? Your hypersenses -?”

“Still working.” Daken grimaced. “Not, it’s my pheromone manipulation. It’s like it’s gone.” It was like losing a sense. He’d known as soon as he woke up that something was wrong – but it had taken his trying to subtly calm down Gabby to realize. He’d tried some more after that – mainly with Gabby, and then attempting to send Logan away – but to no avail.

McCoy stood up and bent to search for something in his bag. “You aren’t simply failing in its use? You don’t – ah – feel it anymore?”

He’d mastered this power with blood and pain. He was finely attuned to the subtle strings to be pushed and pulled at his will, and he couldn’t sense anything now. He was handicapped. “Yes.”

McCoy nodded, his expression grave. “I’ll take some blood samples and get back to you.” He produced a needle and a few phials. “Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

Daken shook his head and offered his arm. “Go ahead.”

“Thank you.” McCoy bent on him to work. “Is this your secondary mutation?”

That should have been a straightforward answer, but Daken found he wasn’t really sure. He furrowed his brow. Had it appeared before or after hypersenses and healing factor? It had happened so long ago, his time in Sendai willfully clouded. When had he begun hearing and smelling things too impossibly far, healing from cuts and bruises without scarring? Hadn’t it been the night his claws had manifested? No, that wasn’t possible – but how could he remember?

“I don’t know.”

McCoy paused. “Well, what appeared first?”

“I don’t know. It’s been too long.” It was frustrating to admit it. And alarming.

“Sixty-odd years, I gather?” McCoy said sympathetically, changing phials.

“More or less.” Daken stared at the blood leaving his body. “I don’t think I’ll be able to answer your questions.”

“Well, let’s see.” McCoy hummed. “Do you recall an age where you know for certain you had these powers? You don’t have to be precise. Children of mutants normally manifest a little earlier –” he suggested gently.

“Yeah.” His voice came out rougher than intended. How could he forget unwittingly driving the bitch Natsumi mad – effectively bringing her hate and fear upon himself? He only had to recall when she’d started avoiding him, even when he longed for her affection. “Six or seven, I think. The pheromones. But the hypersenses, I really can’t recall. The first instance that comes to mind, the first time I noticed maybe, I was ten.” The rumbling of the leaves as he stared at the lifeless bodies of his adoptive parents, the deafening roar of the rain, the certainty someone was hiding among the trees, watching -

“Easy.”
Daken blinked, feeling warm fur against his back – an arm holding him. He was half-reclined on the bed. “What -?”

“You were passing out.” Swiftly, McCoy freed him from the needle. “A combination of blood loss and plain fatigue,” he said, “not to mention I might, ah, have stirred something unpleasant?” He rummaged in his bag some more, averting his eyes to allow Daken to plead ignorance. Daken clenched his jaw. He did feel faint, and the notion that simply thinking of Romulus affected him so, made him seethe. McCoy turned to look at him, a pill in hand. “Here, an antiemetic.” Daken must look positively green, for the man to offer it.

Daken popped the pill into his mouth without a word. McCoy’s gaze was deeply unsettling; he was being studied, and he didn’t like that. He wondered what did Logan think he knew, to run his mouth so; or perhaps the telepaths had decided to recount what they’d seen? Grey Jr and Sr didn’t seem the type, but perhaps Braddock – if the Caucasian woman he’d seen really was her, as Grey’s use of the name Betsy seemed to imply – didn’t have anything better to do with her free time.

His mood soured, Daken didn’t want to entertain the man anymore. Had he been still intact, he’d have pushed a cocktail of pheromones at him, but now he had to resort to words. “Was that all?”

“Yes, yes.” McCoy secured the phials in a small rack. “You can get dressed. I advise rest, for today at least. Please heed me.” He cocked his head. “And I’ll update the kitchens on your need for iron. Would you be amenable to take your meals here, for now?”

Daken gritted his teeth. “Do I have a choice?”

“Oh, so now he was mental. His irritation must show on his face, because McCoy sighed. “You’ve been through an ordeal. Your mind was violated. I know everyone in your family thinks you’re all above such things, but you’re humans, Daken. Please think on it.” And with a pleased nod, he took his leave.

Sanctimonious prick. Daken allowed himself to fume for a full minute, then pulled close the abominable hospital clothes and put them on with a few, angry jerks that left him breathless. The asshole was right. Daken had to regain his strength.

The asshole was also going to work on getting Daken’s powers back, so getting on his bad side wasn’t a viable option. Daken sighed, lay down, and yanked the covers over himself. Bed it is.

He didn’t look forward to the solitude. Laura and Gabby must still be asleep and Logan wouldn’t dare to get close, not so soon.

He’d be left alone with his thoughts. Again. His skin still crawled from that few-seconds-long trip down memory lane. The beginning of the end. How must Romulus have rejoiced as he spied on him from the darkness, delightedly watching him murder Natsumi and break down over Akihira’s suicide! His little weapon, his boy, ripe for the taking – ready to trust the first person who came out of the shadows to make him feel important and wanted, ready to see that trust taken and bent and twisted –

Much like Daken had done. To poor Zach.

He rolled to the side and dry-heaved, evidently the antiemetic not being that strong, but at least he was on an empty stomach and nothing came out, leaving him nauseous and miserable and oh, God,
when was the retching going to stop?

“Whoa! Are you all right?” A cool, comforting hand was at his side, holding him steady, and it could even have been Logan’s, for all he cared.

But it wasn’t. As the cramps finally subsided and he could focus, he smelt snow and cheap cologne. “I’m fine.” He jerked away from Drake’s touch and dragged himself to a sitting position.

Drake hovered by, reeking of concern. “Do you want me to call someone?”

Laura was off-limits and in this exact moment seeing Logan would only set Daken off. Same for Old Logan. “No.”


… water would be nice, despite who was procuring it. “Yes.”

“Back in a mo.” Drake disappeared into the non-quarantined area of the med bay and came back with a plastic cup. “Here.”

Daken took it without comment and sipped at it slowly, lest his stomach felt dared to a rematch.

“… Is this a bad moment?” Drake asked when the cup was empty. Daken stared up at him in disbelief, desperately willing a mocking expression to form on his face.

“What clued you in? The threat of vomit on the immaculate floor?” Well, at least there was the right tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

Drake winced. “I’ll take that as a yes. I’ll leave, then.” He moved to go – but the bastard’s presence, even if unpleasant, could prove to be a distraction from Daken’s thoughts.

“Stay, Drake. Tell me why you felt the need to molest the sick.”

There was palpable relief in the way Drake’s shoulders went up, as if he was bracing himself. He was taking the verbal abuse like a pro; not to mention the blend of guilt and resolution in his scent.

He’d make for a good punching ball. It wasn’t as if he didn’t deserve it.

“So, huh, I’ve been thinking –”

“A novelty, I’m sure,” Daken said politely. Drake grimaced, but stood his ground. Tepid fool.

“Yeah, I kind of walked right into that one. Look, I -” He shook his head, as if to clear his thoughts. “I just wanted to tell you… that I’m sorry.”

Sorry? He was sorry? Oh, this was rich. “You’re apologizing to me.” He didn’t quite know what to emphasize, so he ended up delivering the line a bit flatly. Drake took it as encouragement and Daken was too outraged to stop him from blabbering.

“Yeah. I mean, ever since I came out – ugh, it was more like I was outing – I’ve been battling with this rage, you know? I’m, huh, seeing a therapist now. Getting better. And it got me thinking, you know, about, about our tiff at that gala -” He winced. “Eh, not a tiff. More like – I handled it badly. I had you incapacitated but I was angry and you were – ugh -” He made some ridiculous motion with his hands.

“Frustrating you with my pheromones?” Daken cocked an eyebrow. He simply must see where this
was going, but he was seething at the nerve of the man and the absolute cluelessness.

Drake made a noise. “Huh, yeah. And so I was – I basically cut you in half. And that must have hurt like hell. I shrugged it off, because, you know, healing factor, but – Logan and Laura act like they don’t ever feel pain but that’s not your superpower, despite how you all act about it, so, huh – sorry for ice-stabbing you?” He winced. He had to work on his apologies. He was also an idiot.

Daken blinked. “I’m sorry,” he said, “Are we blaming your Freudian slip on your internalized homophobia?”

“Freudian -?”

“You did penetrate me with an emanation of your body.” Daken was delighted to see Drake squirm – but this was ridiculous, and not what the fool should apologize for. “Drake, you were fighting a supervillain who’d kidnapped your student for possibly nefarious purposes.” He felt ill again, but reined it in with some effort. “I think I can give you a pass for ‘ice-stabbing’ me, especially considering you rid me of the Death Seed.” And that was the closest he’d ever get to thank the bastard for it. “Don’t get me wrong, it did hurt like hell,” he dug the knife in a bit, “but I had greater concerns at the time.”

“… Right.” Drake was pale. “But I -”

“You liked it?” Daken guessed. That special mixture of shame and guilt didn’t have many other meanings. “I find it insulting that you’re turning your apology into a therapy session. I don’t have to hold your hand here, Drake.” So the bastard had anger management problems. It fitted right into the picture Daken had of him.

Drake winced again. “Yeah, you’re right. Sorry. I mean, sorry for hurting you like that. It shouldn’t have happened.” Narcissistic moron. It vexed Daken to recall that he had flirted with him at that gala; he used to have standards –

That train of thought would lead only to regret, and he couldn’t face it now. He was struggling enough without having to mope about his own idiocy from years past, without grieving for what he’d lost.

He had to stay on track; for his sanity, at least.

The fact that Drake lost time and thoughts over the wrong slight was really irritating. But at least Daken could use it to gain something. “I told you it’s all right. But if you want to even the score -”

Drake nodded like an eager puppy. Daken rolled his eyes. “I need a phone. I’d ask Laura, but she’s resting and I don’t want to impose. And it can’t wait.”

“Huh, sure.” Drake fished in his pockets. “Here.”

Daken blinked at the proffered item. “A permanent phone. For me. I seem to have displaced mine.” Hopefully his tone conveyed the unspoken question: ‘Are you daft?’

“Oh, um,” Drake winced. “Look, you absolutely aren’t a prisoner -”

Oh, I see. “But Pryde feels the need to monitor who I talk with?” He couldn’t say he was surprised. It wasn’t even that unreasonable.

“Yeah. Sorry.” Drake sounded miserable. The poor boy, thinking he could get off the hook that easily.
“Well, fine then.” Daken took the phone from his hands and proceeded to browse his contacts.

“What are you -”

“Texting your ex.” Daken tapped quickly. Drake inhaled sharply, likely thinking of his civilian whom Daken had almost killed – another reason why apologizing to Daken was ridiculous, in his opinion. “To tell her the moment she got rid of you was most certainly the best of her life.”

“Her -?” Drake sounded confused. Daken hit send and looked up.

“Dane. Isn’t she an ex of yours? A victim of poor, closeted you?”

Drake gritted his teeth, but still took it. “You know Lorna -? Oh, right.” He scratched his cheek.

“Yes, I’ve had my heroic moments.” Daken handed him back the phone. “Notify me when she answers.”

“Oh-kay,” Drake said slowly, picking up the phone as if it was radioactive. “How did you know she’s my ex?”

“Oh, after we took Mothervine down we stayed up all night braiding each other’s hair and talking about cute boys we kissed,” Daken deadpanned and Drake went red in the face. Ridiculous. “I was a criminal, Drake. And you were working with my father. I studied all of your little X-profiles. And let me tell you, you were the only one caught by surprise when they outings you. Were you always this clueless?”

“… Right.” Drake clenched his jaw, finally showing some spine. “And what do you want from her?” Without waiting for an answer, he very rudely went to read the message. His eyes widened slightly and he lowered the phone, averting his gaze in shame. “You think Jimmy’s in trouble,” he said quietly.

“He’s M.I.A. and there’s a chemical specifically designed to work on us? Yes, Drake, I don’t like those odds.” Lorna should have at least an inkling of where to start looking. Magneto had known where to send Daken to take care of the alien, after all. “Your genius astounds me.”

Drake grimaced. Yet again. It was becoming a common feature. “I’ll tell you as soon as she answers.”

“Good.” Daken primly plumped up his pillow. “You can go now.” Before he gave in to the instinct to tear the bastard to ribbons.

“Yeah.” Drake started, then stilled. “Can I ask you something?”

Daken prayed for patience. “I do need to rest, you know. Doctor’s orders.”

“Yes, but – you say you forgive me, but you’re treating me like shit. Why’s that? It’s all right if you’re angry with me, I can take it, really, and – and I heard you, you said you hate cold, and I guess that’s my fault too, and I’m really, really sorry -” Drake blurted out, all in one breath – quite a feat, to be honest.

And since he seemed so willing to get crucified and yet so disturbingly convinced that just because he’d apologized he was ought basic decency, Daken lost it.

“Get over yourself,” he snapped. “My aversion to the cold has nothing to do with you.”
“But I -”

“I’m treating you like shit because you are,” he snarled. Drake gulped. “You’re an abusive piece of shit. You’re so caught up in your own narrative that you don’t even realize you’re apologizing to the wrong person.”

“Wait, what -” Drake took a step back.

“You,” Daken sat up straighter, battling the lightheadedness because apparently McCoy was right and he did need rest, but this was more important, “punched a child in your care hard enough that he lost consciousness, and you were smiling,” he spat. “Liked that too, didn’t you? Turned you on?”

“Wait a second -” Drake was pale. And wide-eyed. Good.

“I was possessed by a Death Seed and I still didn’t lay a finger on that boy’s head.” He’d done much worse, in his opinion. He’d rid Zach of his innocence. Nothing he ever did – no amount of apologies – would make it okay, and the fact that Drake had the chance to heal some of Zach’s wounds and was too blind and stupid to see it drove Daken mad. “And your excuse is coming out jitters?”

Drake paled some more. He stank of self-pity and alarm and terror, but evidently he still thought he could act heroically, and he held up his hands in a pacifying gesture. “Hey, calm down, you’re working yourself into a state -”

“Get out of my room!” Daken shrieked. He wished desperately for his pheromones, to knock the bastard out cold. He didn’t have the strength to jump out of the bed and stab him, but by God, if Drake came any closer he’d do it. And pocket his damn phone. “Get out, get out, get out -”

Drake turned on his heels and fled. Daken fell back onto the bed gasping, as breathless as if he’d just endured one of Romulus’ most straining lessons.

The cold. That bastard had thought Daken feared the cold because of him. Ah! As if. The cold reminded Daken of something far worse than an idiot snapping him in half; it reminded him of lessons he’d endured when he was far younger that poor Zach. The fact he’d never done anything like that to the boy relieved him, but it should have never happened in the first place. He’d been sloppy, to let the Death Seed take over like that. To almost turn him into the monster who’d taken him apart.

He knew that Laura was right: nothing had happened. Zach was safe. But he couldn’t simply forget what had molded him either, what was in him – his thoughts always turning back to that nightmare. It was a gaping wound that he was trying to close ever since Logan had rid the world of Romulus, taking the monster straight from Daken’s hands to deliver the killing blow somewhere else. Some of the old fury resurfaced: Logan had taken his vengeance from him. He had no idea of the tribulations Daken had gone through to simply summon the will to rebel against his master –

No. Not his master. No more. Death, at least, had rid Daken of that burden, even though he should have killed Romulus himself. But Logan had decided to take it upon himself, and it would have to do. There was no use thinking about it now; it had happened so long ago. So many things had happened in-between, and he’d made peace with Logan’s ill-advised decision while the man was dead.

The fact that he was alive now couldn’t bring Daken back to that old resentment. He’d give his father a chance.

Who knew? Perhaps something good would come of it.
Next: Laura comes to a realization.

[Er – apologies to anyone who thought Bobby was going to be a love interest ^^^ I was re-reading earlier chapters and a few scenes could be read that way, maybe, if one’s a shipper. But that’s not going to happen (but I guess that was clear here). There are other things in store, though ^^ Speaking of the aversion to the cold, it’s mostly a callback to a panel we see in the Siege storyline – it shows little Daken alone and naked in a blizzard, likely to test his resistance. I headcanon that he hates the cold, the snow, and all things winter-y because of that. There’s a whole string of imagery that you will have picked up on – the cold, the void, the darkness – that remind him of Romulus. I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Let me know what you think ^-^ ]
Laura comes to a realization.

Chapter Notes

**Additional warnings:** verbal abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

17.

The teacher’s kitchen was empty, thanks to the lull between breakfast and lunch.

Laura sat down, set on eating quickly and then going to check on Daken. She’d agreed to leave his room only because he was right that she desperately needed some rest, and she’d slept soundly for a few hours – but she didn’t like the thought of leaving him alone and bed-ridden, not after what she’d seen in his mind. She knew him, and she knew that there was still work to be done. Just because he’d agreed to come back didn’t mean he wasn’t grieving. Being trapped in his own body had taken its toll, and she hadn’t seen any anger in him. That, she could have got behind, because it would have meant he had something to focus on. But he’d acted so subdued that morning.

And there was Logan. Daken hadn’t commented on it, but his parting words had clearly been an overture. It was up to Logan now, but she feared he’d just stay clear of the med bay and wait for Daken to make the first step.

“That porridge *is* going to get cold, ya know.”

Laura looked up. She hadn’t noticed Jubilee sneaking up on her; not a good sign.

But she smiled at her friend. Jubilee was holding a tray, her sunglasses pushed into her hair, and grinned back. “Can I sit here?”

“Of course.” Laura dug her spoon into the porridge, that did look a bit cold already. “Shogo?”

“Still with Jono!” Jubilee settled down and dug into her own breakfast with gusto, to mask the faint color rising to her cheeks. Her heartbeat was a little erratic, like always these days. “He volunteered last night, you know, to let me check on your brother. I popped in just now and he said they had a ‘boys only outing’, so I let them go. Can’t be too upset if I overslept, right?” She winced a bit.

“You did stay up most of the night,” Laura said softly. She was extremely grateful for that. It had warmed her to see Jubilee in the room when she’d come to.

“Yeah.” Jubilee ducked her head, a little smile on her lips. “Not like you. I didn’t even think I’d see you here, thought you were sleeping it off with Gabby.”

“Gabby *is* still sleeping,” Laura conceded. “I slept more than enough.” She ate a few spoonfuls during the moment of silence that followed. Jubilee was gazing at her with something Laura couldn’t quite name.

“You still worried?” she said eventually.
“I can’t not worry,” Laura set down the spoon. “Yes, Daken’s safe now. But he’s not… he’s not
well. I want to be there for him.”

Jubilee nodded. “You know, I remember him from your mom’s funeral.” Laura shut her eyes for a
moment. “It was the first time I saw him, I think, from up close at least,” Jubilee said softly. “This
scary supervillain who’s done a lot of really questionable things. But he practically melts around
you and Gabby. You do him a world of good, Laura.” She smiled. “I think it’s great that you worry
about your brother.” Jubilee reached out suddenly, and grabbed her hand. It wasn’t unwelcome or
strange – she’d done it before, and Laura had learned to be affectionate a while ago. But Jubilee had
a shimmer in her eyes and red blotches on her cheeks, and her heart rate was increasing –

Oh. Laura blinked, surprised. But it wasn’t unwelcome. Was it? She wasn’t sure.

“But?” she stalled.

“But Laura, you’re going all Wolvie again. All wrapped up and ready to take the weight of the
whole world on your shoulders. And you don’t need to, okay? You’ve got friends.” You’ve got me,
her scent was saying. Completely, and unreservedly.

Her heart skipped a beat. It was strange. She hadn’t felt this way in a while. After Warren – frankly,
she thought he’d been a distraction. She needed to stay focused on Gabby, and ultimately he couldn’t
get that. He was always moping about the lost time, and neither of them deserved to get stuck.

And Jubilee didn’t either. “Jubilee,” Laura said softly, “Are you worried as my friend, or as a
potential partner?”

Jubilee squeaked. “Oh, God, I fucked it up. Didn’t I?” She brought her free hand to her quickly
reddening face. “I’m sorry, really! I know you have a lot of things to worry about and I don’t want to
pressure you. Your friendship is too important to me. Let’s restart, okay? Let’s pretend this isn’t
happening, okay? Yes?” She was rubbing her free hand over her eyes, and let out a nervous
laughter, and it hurt, to see her like that. Laura didn’t want her to hurt.

“Jubilee.” She squeezed her hand. “I care about you. You’re very dear to me.” Jubilee moaned in
embarrassment.

“Oh, God.” She hung her head – but she could have pulled her hand away, and she wasn’t doing it,
soaking in the warm contact. And Laura found that she couldn’t let go either. She didn’t know what
to do – this was new. It felt natural, after what they’d faced. Jubilee had always been at her side, and
Laura often found herself craving her company. But this was a commitment of a different kind. She
did love when they lay on the grass, talking, sometimes holding hands. Simple things. But what if
Jubilee wanted more? More time, more attention? She deserved someone to help with Shogo, too.
Someone who wouldn’t disappear for weeks on end.

“… I thought you were dating Starsmore.” That – wasn’t what she’d wanted to say, but it came out
of her mouth in a rush. Jubilee looked up, distinct hope in her eyes.

“Jono’s great. He’s a good guy, you know. But he’s -” She bit her lower lip. “We aren’t – we don’t
really work. We’re better off as friends. And he agrees. He –” She let out a hesitant laughter. “He,
um, he’s the one who said I was being silly and I should just go after you.”

Laura was taken aback. “Did he?”

Jubilee looked sheepish. “He said I was being obvious and I shouldn’t hold off. But it’s fine!” she
hurried to add. “I don’t want to lose you, Laura, really. We can keep being friends. If you still want
to. I won’t bother you, promise.”

“You would never bother me.” There was a lump in Laura’s throat. She felt – her chest felt so light. She wanted… God, she wanted to try. She squeezed Jubilee’s hand. “I don’t want to pretend this conversation didn’t happen, Jubilee.”

“Yeah. Of course.” She grimaced and made to pull her hand away but Laura held on to it like the precious thing it was, covering it with her other hand too. Jubilee gasped, and searched Laura’s face.

“I’m saying I – I think I feel the same.” Laura carefully searched for the right words, feeling heat rising to her cheeks. “And I do want to try. You’re precious to me, Jubilee. I -”

She couldn’t finish that sentence, because Jubilee sprang to her feet, the most beautiful smile on her face, and leaned over the table – only to stop a few inches from Laura’s face. “Sorry. Can I – can I kiss you? I really want to kiss you,” she murmured, her breath warm against Laura’s lips.

“Yes.” Laura tilted her head up.

It was sloppy. And enthusiastic, and happy, and so, so warm, Jubilee’s lips so soft and tentative against hers. Jubilee jiggled as she kissed her, exhilarated, and Laura felt giddy too. She had only ever kissed another woman before. Finesse. It had been cold and mechanical and her betrayal still stung. But it was different with Jubilee. It felt right. It felt warm, and kind, and like coming home. She found she could keep going for hours, but Jubilee needed to breathe, and eventually she broke the kiss – but she stayed there, resting her forehead against Laura’s, her eyes alight with joy.

It was a beautiful sight.

*Laura? I’m so sorry to interrupt this.* Jean’s voice rang clearly in her mind. Laura stiffened, her mind already racing with the possibilities – Daken was hurting. He needed help… *No, no, nothing quite so serious! I’d go, but I don’t think he trusts me yet to suddenly appear in his room. I’m waiting.*

Jubilee blinked and moved back a bit, worry clear in her gaze – perhaps thinking Laura was having second thoughts. “All right?” she said hesitantly.

Laura tapped at her own temple. “It’s Jean.” *I’m waiting.*

*I’m routinely checking on him... just the surface of his thoughts. And he’s upset right now. He could use some company.*

*I’m on it.* She looked back at Jubilee, who waited patiently. “I – I need to go. Daken needs me. Do you mind -”

“Of course not!” Jubilee squeezed her hand. “You go. We’ll catch up later -?” There was a hint of fear there at the end, even though she masked it admirably. Laura’s chest ached.

*Actually, Jean spoke up, Her cheerful demeanor might help. Keep his mind off his thoughts.*

*Thank you, Jean.* “Would you mind coming with?” Laura amended her question.

Jubilee smiled like the sun. “Lead the way!”

They cleared the table and took off for the med bay, and it was natural to hold their hands as they walked. Jubilee was gently brushing her fingers against Laura’s palm, a radiant smile on her face,
and it was warm and beautiful.

When they reached the med bay, she could smell from a distance that Daken was upset. They stopped at his door. He was giving his back to it, when he never would have done something so tactically disadvantageous, and he radiated frustration and rage and self-hatred, huddled up under the covers like he used to do on Mystique’s plane. The air smelt vaguely rancid, and she caught Iceman’s scent, lingering. A tray with red meat and spinach lay mostly untouched on the nighstand.

Laura knocked softly. “Daken?”

Her brother shifted under the covers. “Did you get some sleep?” he grumbled irritably. Heartened by the presence of a lively streak, Laura came into the room.

“Yes, I did. Did you?”

Daken muttered “As if,” under his breath. Then, louder: “What is she doing here?”

“Hey, I’m offended!” Jubilee said cheerfully. “We came to visit you. How are you holding up?”

With a groan, Daken rolled to his other side so he could face them, only his eyes visible above the blanket. They were two bright slits. “What does it look like?”

He was clearly upset.

He’d never say what was wrong, not in Jubilee’s presence, but Laura could guess. She worriedly took a step in his direction, her arm stretched behind – and he immediately zeroed in on her linked hands with Jubilee.

He looked up at her, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Ah. You brought your girlfriend to see the family. Well come on, Ms Lee, don’t be shy. Let me see you.”

Laura blushed and suddenly wanted to drag Jubilee away – she knew he could be unpleasant when he wanted to – but he was sitting up now, and the distraction would do him good. And if he overstepped his boundaries, Laura would have words with him.

Much later. When he was feeling better again.

Jubilee, however, was undeterred, and she walked up to him, dragging Laura with her. “Ms Lee? Do I look your age? Call me by my name, everyone does.”

He smirked. It was like witnessing the second coming, so stark was the relief Laura felt at the sight. “I’m sorry. Jubilation. Blessings upon this union,” he said with a flourish.

Jubilee snorted. “No, no, no. Too stuffy! It’s Ju-bi-lee,” she pronounced clearly. “Pleasure to meet you!” She stuck out her free hand.

He looked at it. “We’ve met,” he said, arching an eyebrow.

At her mom’s funeral. But he’d mostly kept to himself, nodding to Old Logan and Remy from a distance and ignoring the other X-Men, opting for entertaining her aunt.

“But we didn’t speak! You know, to get to know each other.” Jubilee grinned.

“Oh, I know you.” Daken cocked his head. “You’re one of Logan’s strays.” He looked like he wanted to add something, but then he kept his mouth shut.
“Be nice,” Laura said quietly.

“Anything for you, sister.” Daken smiled at her, then shook Jubilee’s hand. “I’m sorry.”

“You know, that was pretty tame for an insult,” Jubilee said brightly. “I honestly expected worse.”

“It wasn’t, per se,” Daken said. “You’re part of the army of little girls whom he sees and instantly decides to adopt. In short, his stray.” There wasn’t the old heat in his voice – he was past that. He’d told her once that Logan only took on girls because they were easier to control. His tone as he said so haunted her to this day. “And I’d never really insult someone who’s seeing my sister. Although,” Daken cocked his head. “I would hurt you if you hurt her.”

“I don’t plan to,” Jubilee said softly, beaming at her. Laura’s chest fluttered.

“How sickening. You’re like two puppies.” Daken shook his head. “What are you doing here? Go make out in the hallways. Give them a scandal. Live a little!”

“I wanted to check on you,” Laura murmured. Daken’s gaze softened.

“You don’t need to worry about me, Laura. I’m a grown man, I can handle some solitude.”

You really can’t, she thought. He was putting on a mask for her benefit, but he’d go back to marinate in guilt as soon as they left. She sat down on his bed. “Well, indulge me. How are you holding up?”

He sniffed. “Terribly. The food’s obscene and I’m wearing cotton boxers,” he deflected.

“Oh, the horror,” Jubilee stage-whispered. He nodded at her.

“Exactly. Oh, and I might have lost my pheromones, but McCoy’s on it,” he said offhandedly. Laura felt her eyes widen.

“I’m so sorry.” She caught his hand. “I noticed you weren’t using them, but I didn’t think to tell you when you came back.”

“You were barely holding your eyes open,” he pointed out, softly. “I think I can forgive you.”

“Yeah, that sucks,” Jubilee piped up – a remote lilt to her voice. “I spent some time without my powers, you know. After M-Day. And then I became a vampire. I’d really missed the fireworks,” she whispered reverently.

Laura squeezed her hand. “But now you have them back.”

“Yeah.” Jubilee found her smile again. “So hang on, okay?” she told Daken. “You’ll get them back.”

“… Thank you,” he said quietly.

Then he changed completely, bristling as he smelt who’d just come into the med bay. Iceman approached slowly and hesitantly, as if fearing for his life, and Laura wondered what had happened earlier. Had the man stopped by to apologize for stabbing Daken? He’d expressed that he wanted to, a few times. Perhaps she should have dissuaded him, knowing Daken was indeed angry at the man, but she’d thought that gratitude would temper Daken’s reaction.

It hadn’t, evidently. “What do you want?” he ground out through gritted teeth. Iceman stopped at the door with a wince.
“Sorry. Lorna messaged me back. You said you wanted to know -”

“And?”

“She’ll work on it and let you know. And... I thought... maybe I could tell Kitty to increase our efforts to find him, what do you -”

“Considering your efforts have been lukewarm at best so far, that will be an improvement,” Daken spat. Jubilee arched an eyebrow at the exchange. “But of course, teen Jean says it’s all right, so there’s no need to really look for him, right?” Were they talking about Jimmy?

“… We’ve been occupied.” Iceman said dejectedly.

“Well, pray you find him soon, Drake, or else you’re going to have to deal with me. Now get out.”

Iceman hung his head and left without a word. Jubilee whistled and turned to look at Daken. “Damn, why so vicious? Bobby’s a good kid, you know.”

“You think Logan’s the best person in the world,” Daken said contemptuously, all his disdain gone. “Your judgment’s impaired.”

“No, I think Laura’s the best person in the world,” Jubilee corrected him. “Get your facts straight. What was that about?” she asked, simmering with curiosity. “Why did you ask him to contact Polaris?”

Daken scoffed. “I wouldn’t trust him to deliver a message. I sent her a message from his phone, seeing as I can’t have one of my own. Pryde thinks I can’t be trusted not to send blueprints of the school to all of my villainous buddies, apparently. Confined to a bed, no less. She thinks too highly of me.” He rolled his eyes.

“You can use mine.” Before Laura could suggest the same, Jubilee had already fished a phone out of her pocket. “It’s a spare.”

Daken took it, an odd look on his face. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I don’t have Lorna’s number, I’ll have to ask -”

“I know it.” Daken entered it on the phone.

“Well, that’s a story I’m curious about.” Jubilee grinned. “You’re friends with her?”

“Ohhh, her company’s adequate.” Jubilee waggled her eyebrows. “Whatcha ask her?”

“To find Jimmy, right?” Laura interrupted their chat, lovely as it was to see them so at ease with each other. “Why?” There was a looming sense of dread in her. She hadn’t thought about him, all her efforts focused on finding Daken. Did he fear Jimmy had been taken from Soteira too? Had he seen their brother at the facility, perhaps?

He squeezed her hand. “I’d just better be absolutely sure he’s roaming some forest in communion with that thing. I can’t shake off the feeling he’s in danger.”

“I should have thought about it,” she said. She heard the despair in her voice. “It just slipped my mind. I never got close to him in the first place, and it slipped my mind.” How could she berate Logan for playing favorites when she’d done the same? Jimmy was blood, just as Daken and Gabby
and Logan. He was family. And she’d thought it unimportant. “I should have -”

“You did your best,” he told her softly. “You saved me, Laura. You can’t be everywhere.”

“He’s right.” Jubilee squeezed her arm. “I’m sure we’ll find him, okay? You heard Bobby -”

Daken scoffed.

“Okay, seriously. What’s your deal with Bobby?” Jubilee asked – changing the topic, trying to distract Laura. That wouldn’t work. She’d been reckless. Stupid -

Jubilee wrapped an arm around her, and she melted into the embrace with some shame. She should get out, track Pryde down and urge her to use all their resources, but Jubilee was warm and safe. And Daken was snarking away, and at least some things were well.

She had to take her victories.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Daken’s situation is discussed.

[I’ve been shipping these girls for ages and I’m beyond overjoyed I could work their relationship in here! I think they work tremendously well, they really balance each other out.
Do let me know what you think! Your comments keep me going ^.^ ]
“Let me get this straight,” Logan said through gritted teeth. “We don’t have anything?”

He’d finally managed to get into a meeting about Soteira. Now that his boy was well, he could keep up to date on the search for the bastards that had taken and used the both of them. He’d expected some progress to have already been made, perhaps plans to be already in motion. He’d had a mind to join whatever mission was about to be launched, seeing as Daken didn’t want to see him for now – wanting to give the boy some results as a peace offering, the head of one of their tormentors perhaps.

But the X-Men had none of the above.

Kitty sighed. “We have some names. And money trails. We’ll follow them -”

“But none of them will know who procured the chemical.” Logan crossed his arms. “Right?”

Across from him, Jean grimaced. She and Betsy had closely examined the mind of the man they’d found with Daken, one of the “masters”: he was convinced that none of his colleagues knew who’d actually come up with that thing. They’d perfected it on Logan, apparently, but where had it come from?

This meant that, even if the X-Men dismantled Soteira, some form of the chemical would still be out there, a threat to his entire family. That couldn’t do.

“I would cross that bridge when we come to it,” Betsy spoke up. She was sitting beside Jean, her arms crossed on the table. “That’s just what that lowform believes; it’s not necessarily the truth. I suggest we start worrying about it if we find out it’s true.” Rachel, standing behind Kitty, shook her head. Before she could intervene, Betsy added: “I get the danger, believe me. But we don’t have anything to work on, at the moment. Once we have a clearer picture, we’ll be able to cross-reference and investigate more easily.” She sounded cool, and detached. It seemed that involving her had been the right choice; instead of sitting in her room all day, she’d been given a purpose, and she could focus on it instead of staying alone with her thoughts.

What she said made sense; they needed to interrogate each and everyone of the bastards, there was no way around it. If no one knew anything, they could still know someone who did – and there was no way of knowing without getting to them first.

It made sense; but Logan didn’t like it. These things took time, and most of the bastards must have gotten into hiding already.

’Ro gently squeezed his arm, as if to remind him that he wasn’t alone and they’d all contribute to fix
this as quickly as possible.

“Betsy’s right,” Kitty said, cocking her head in thanks. “We’ll be thorough, Logan. And if we still
don’t manage to get intel,” she grimaced, “we have two informers to use as a last resort.”

She meant him and Daken. The telepaths could hunt down information in their minds, similarly to
when they’d sought clues in Logan’s to find Daken. It had taken their concerted effort, though, and
Jean said it took too much strain on the victim.

Logan was ready to do it again, to protect his family. Jean knew that; they’d talked about it. If the
need for it arose, Logan would comply. But Kitty, no doubt, hoped to use Daken instead, not
wanting Logan to get hurt.

As if on cue, Kitty turned towards Hank, who’d sat silently up until now, focused on a tablet.
“What’s Daken’s condition?”

“Well,” Hank adjusted his glasses on his nose, buying some time to gather his thoughts. As they
waited, Bobby skidded into the room, smelling faintly agitated.

“Sorry I’m late,” he muttered, sliding into a free seat. Logan could smell his son on him. Had he been
to the med bay?

“We didn’t really cover anything new,” Kitty waved a hand. “Hank?”

“Daken’s mostly fine,” the man finally said. “He’s a bit worn out, but that’s nothing that his healing
factor won’t take care of, with some help. He’s free from the chemical –” He hesitated.

“Go on,” Kitty urged him. Logan leaned on the table to get a better look at him. He was pondering
something; Logan knew that look. The scientist in him was simmering against some challenge.

“He’s, ah, experiencing an after-effect. His pheromone manipulation ability seems to be gone.”

Logan sat back against his chair. That must have hit the kid hard; he seemed to rely upon it greatly.
“You gonna help him, Hank?”

“Certainly.”

Kitty coughed. “Excuse me – I don’t want to seem callous here, but should we give the manipulative
villain a weapon back?”

“Kätzchen,” Kurt chided. Logan was glad for his intervention, because he didn’t quite know how to
react. Yes, she was right – but this was his son. His son whom, according to Laura, was trying to
turn over a new leaf. All things considered, Kitty was doing an admirable job of holding off her
unease at harboring Daken, but then every now and then she went and said something like this – it
made Logan itchy.

Kitty threw up her hands. “All right, all right. Sorry. Can’t blame me for thinking about it, though.”

“Well,” Hank said slowly, “I do understand your ethical conundrum. But that’s not up to us.”

“I know, I know,” Kitty muttered. “I get it! I said sorry.”

“Actually, it might not be up to me either,” Hank said, tapping his fingers against the table. “Laura
once mentioned that Daken was encountering some difficulties with his healing factor, due to
psychological strain. It came back, eventually, but we might be looking at something similar – the
trauma he just endured might be blocking his powers.”

“Well, that’s not unheard of.” ’Ro nodded.

“What was this psychological strain?” Logan wanted to know.

“Laura never said.” Hank brushed a finger against his lips, already miles away – focused on this puzzle. “Anyway, that was all from me.”

“All right.” Kitty turned to face Jean and Betsy. “And your opinion?”

“There is trauma,” Jean said. “It is my intention to ask him to stay for a little while, after he gets better. I want to work on his mind with him.”

“And it would be better to have him on hand anyway, at least until we find Soteira, no?” Kurt added, adding his support to have Daken stay – and someday work his issues out with Logan.

“And you think it wise?” Kitty asked with a grimace. “To let him stay here, around the kids?”

Betsy made to speak, but Jean cut her off. “There’s no nefarious plan in his mind, I assure you.”

Kitty glanced at Betsy and motioned with a hand, encouraging her to speak her mind – after all, of the three telepaths, Betsy was the one likelier to express doubts. She’d met Daken at his worst.

But she merely nodded. “What Jean said. He’s clean.”

Kitty looked dubious. “So I shouldn’t worry about him seeking out Zach?”

Betsy grimaced. “Believe me, he has no intention to.”

“For the moment,” Jean said softly yet firmly, looking as if she would personally set up a meeting if no one did. Kitty didn’t comment on that, though she grimaced.

“All right,” she sighed, rubbing at her temple. It was clear that she wasn’t quite enthusiastic at the prospect of allowing Daken to stay for long. “Well, that’s all then. We’ll re-adjourn -”

“Have you talked about Jimmy?” Bobby said suddenly.

“Jimmy?” Kitty furrowed her brows. “No.”

Jimmy. His son from another universe, whom Logan had never met.

“Well, we should be looking for him,” Bobby said. “Just in case -”

Just in case he’d been kidnapped by Soteira, too. Logan’s blood run cold. An alien-possessed brainwashed mini-Logan… he didn’t like that.

“We are looking for him,” Kitty said. “And he’s a force of nature, Bobby, I doubt they’d manage to take him down -”

“That’s what Jean said. Sorry, little Jean,” Bobby muttered in Jean’s direction. “That her entire team couldn’t take him. But we don’t know what kind of resources these people have, Kitty. Better safe than sorry, no?”

“I guess you’re right,” she conceded. “But we’re pretty tight right now, Bobby.”
“I’ll work on it,” Bobby proposed earnestly, surprising Logan – and not just him, judging from the way Kitty raised her eyebrows. He seemed really invested. “I’ll coordinate with Lorna, she’s already looking.”

“I thought Erik decided to let the matter rest,” Logan piped up. They’d told him that Magneto had wanted to terminate the boy, fearful the possession would make him dangerous, and that little Jean had convinced him of the contrary.

“Yes, huh -” Bobby rubbed at his neck. “It’s Daken. He asked her. Through my phone,” he fished it from his pocket. “He’s worried.”

There was a lot to unpack in his words. “Daken knows Jimmy?” And he hadn’t tried to kill him, and was worried about him? “And Lorna?” Well enough to ask her a favor?

“They all worked together,” Kitty said primly. “You remember I mentioned something called Mothervine?” Logan nodded. “It was a terrorist global threat. Lorna led a team to stop it, and Daken was on it.”

Logan sat, dumbfounded. His son, on an X-team. He’d have loved to see it. His heart swelled with pride already. “And that’s how they met? Jimmy and him?”

“No idea.” Kitty cocked her head. “Did Daken put you up to this, Bobby?” she asked, concern in her voice.

Bobby winced. “No, he’ll probably yell at me again when he finds out. But I kind of have to do this now.” His lips thinned to a white line; he smelt ashamed.

Before Logan could ask what did he mean by that, Kitty sighed. “Bobby. I get why you needed to approach him, I really do. But did you have to do it when he’d just come out of mind-control? He was bound to be volatile.”

Bobby grimaced. “I was just passing by, and -” He wrung his hands. “I had to, Kitty.”

“I’m sorry,” Logan interjected, fed up with the nebulous conversation. “What is this about?” It must have something to do with Zach’s accusations, clearly.

“I almost cut your son in half with a huge, sharp snowflake,” Bobby rushed to say. “There was blood everywhere. It hurt a lot, I could see it on his face.”

Logan paused. It couldn’t have been pleasant, that was for sure. But – “This is when you were trying to rescue Zach?”

“Yeah.” Bobby leaned back against his chair, eyeing him worriedly, as if he thought Logan would stab him for the insult – as Zach had probably hoped for when he’d mentioned it. “I know what you’re about to say, but there was no need to do that, I could have done literally anything else. And he wasn’t even himself, so it only seemed right to apologize to him.”

“Well.” Logan shifted on his seat. “If you felt the need to, kid,” he said awkwardly. Perhaps Bobby was waiting for a scolding, but Logan could hardly say something to him.

“I take it it didn’t go well?” Kurt asked. “He’s not required to accept your apology, Bobby. Although it’s commendable you sought to right this wrong.” He clasped Bobby’s arm.

“No, that’s the thing.” Bobby made a face. “He brushed it off, said he couldn’t blame me.” Was this really the same son who’d gone after Logan for years, bent on revenge?
No. They’d already established that he wasn’t.

“But you said he yelled at you.” Kitty pursed her lips.

“Over Zach.” Bobby exchanged a glance full of meaning with her; her eyebrows had almost reached her hairline. “He called me an abusive piece of shit for punching Zach.”

“You punch the boy, don’t notice when he’s gone, put a collar on him –” Logan listed, unable to linger on this new confirmation that his son apparently cared about the boy just as much as the boy cared about him. “No wonder Zach thinks so highly of you.”

Kitty scoffed. “Logan, please. There was an angry mob and Zach was canceling our powers, you’d have done the same.” She turned towards Bobby. “And you apologized to Zach immediately! We explained everything to him –”

“It hardly seemed the right moment to tell that to Daken, you know? He was furious.” Bobby bit his lower lip. “And look, if he knows, it means Zach told him, right? So Zach was obviously still upset by it, at least when he was with Daken. So I went to talk to Zach again – and he wouldn’t hear me out, because, and I quote, I’m just a hypocrite who hurts people and then pretends to care about them. And – he wasn’t talking about himself,” he added quietly. “He said the only reason why he’s not dragging Daken away from our ‘clutches’ is because Jean convinced him that Daken needs help.”

An odd silence fell upon those words. Logan could see the crease of uneasiness in Kitty’s brow; and Logan himself had witnessed first-hand the extent of the boy’s obsession with Daken. He had no idea of what had happened between them, but he saw in the way Kitty’s nostrils flared that she was thinking unsavory, terrible things, despite the boy’s protestations and the fact that, if anything untoward had happened, one of the telepaths – certainly Jean – would have picked up on it.

Logan was furious that Kitty could even think something like that. Daken was a criminal, yes – but he wasn’t an animal. He’d fought against the Death Seed, kept the darkness at bay.

“That’s alarming,” Kitty said eventually.

“Not at all,” Jean countered. “It’s good. It’s genuine affection, Kitty.”

“Zach was held prisoner,” Kitty pointed out. “It’s Stockholm Syndrome, Jean. And Daken can’t have formed a genuine connection with the boy he kidnapped while he was possessed. It’s a ruse.”

“One none of us sees?” Jean arched an eyebrow. “We’ve been in Daken’s mind, Kitty. He cares deeply about the boy.”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Betsy spoke up. “I get you don’t want to spread his secrets, but it does seem fishy, Jean!”

Kitty nodded. “Thank you, that’s exactly –”

“Listen,” Betsy interrupted her. “I’ll tell you this: Daken’s ashamed. He feels responsible for the boy.” She placed a hand over Jean’s, perhaps in reassurance that she wasn’t going to spill everything they’d seen in Daken’s mind. Jean’s concern touched Logan. “You were there when he apologized to Zach,” Betsy continued. Kitty nodded grimly. “He’s mortified. He’s grief-stricken. He wants to do right by that boy. He thinks what he did was unforgivable.”

“What did he do?” Kitty said hotly.
“Love, you know that.” Rachel put a hand on her shoulder. “We checked. Basic combat training, nothing more -”

“He got him addicted to MGH, Ray.” Kitty rolled her eyes and Logan felt his stomach churn unpleasantly. But this wasn’t his boy. It hadn’t been Daken, but the Death Seed. “And I find it laughable that he’d bemoan Bobby hitting Zach once when he beat up Evan… for how long, Logan?”

Logan grimaced. That – that hadn’t been on the Death Seed. That was on Daken alone. But Daken was different now. Changed for the better; enough that the thought of harming Zach was anathema to him. “A while,” he choked out.

“A while. And I’m supposed to believe he just finds that despicable now? Just like that?”

“Oh, for -”

“Betsy!” Rachel gasped.

“He relates, Kitty!” Betsy exploded. “Believe me, I get your worry. But at the end of the day, Daken was a hurt young mutant that slipped through Charles’ fingers. He once was a suggestible, lonely kid who was taken and trained. We all know the basics from Logan, don’t we? How he was brought up by Romulus?” Betsy cocked her head in his direction. Logan found he couldn’t speak, a lump in his throat, his wrongdoings laid out before him: he hadn’t saved Daken. He’d left him for dead in his momma’s belly, to be retrieved and abused. “He never trained Evan,” Betsy said softly, addressing Kitty once more. “He trained Zach. There’s your difference, Kitty. He thinks he did to Zach the same thing that was done to him, and he hates himself for it. Despite,” she added, because Kitty was opening her mouth again, “not doing anything that monster did.”

Logan’s tongue was sandpaper in his mouth, but he had to ask. He was seething and his heart ached for his son, for the thousands of questions he’d never dared to ask – fearing the answers. “What did Romulus do?” He was of a mind to visit Romulus in prison; he’d been contented to simply leave him there to rot, but now he wanted his blood. He was sure S.H.I.E.L.D. would turn a blind eye on it –

Betsy squeezed Jean’s hand, her clear gaze on Logan once more. “He’ll tell you when he’s ready, Logan.”

And there really wasn’t anything to counter that.

She was right. His son would tell him when he was ready –

And Logan hoped he would be ready to listen this time.

Chapter End Notes

Next: A conversation under the stars.

[I’m taking a holiday break! The fic will return on January 6th.]
Daken was getting antsy.

Resting was well and good, but at the end of the second day he found that he’d spent even too much time doing nothing. The hours went slowly by; his sisters came to visit often, but it wasn’t right to monopolize their time like this. Especially with Laura’s newest development – it was good, to see her like this. She’d talked about Lee sometimes, before, and he’d always thought there was more to it than what she said. And now he was proven right, and she was happy, and relaxed, and he didn’t want her to spend the first days of her relationship stuck at his bedside.

He’d finally told her to just bring him some books and then go spend some time alone with her woman; but he’d ended up spending the last few hours with Gabby huddled up on his bed and chatting away, the books forgotten. After dinner Laura had reappeared to take Gabby to their room, and it gladdened him to see her so rested, exuding happiness.

During the past two days he’d also seen Hank McCoy more times than he’d have cared to in his life, the man constantly showing up to prod here and there, still no answer to give – but at least reassuring Daken that the chemical seemed to be gone.

Which was great, yes. But his pheromone manipulation was still missing, and he was beginning to despair.

It was a part of him. God knew how often he’d cursed it, especially when he was young – unable to understand whether anyone truly wanted his company. But then he’d learned to turn it into a sharp weapon at his disposal. It was a part of his daily life, every smallest interaction tinged by it. It was a sixth sense, and he felt lost without it. He felt naked, exposed. He thought back on things he hadn’t thought about in a long time – how different life could have been without it, for instance. Perhaps he’d have had a more balanced childhood. Still horribly bullied by the children around the village, but would it have mattered as strongly as it had, if the bitch Natsumi hadn’t been too scared to comfort him? Perhaps she would have contented herself with just Daken; perhaps she wouldn’t have tried to force Akihira’s hand by announcing her pregnancy. Perhaps they could have been a family -

Of course, Romulus would have wanted to take him, eventually. Perhaps he’d have killed Daken’s adoptive parents himself, instead of letting Daken do all the work at his tender age. There was no doubt, though, that he would have eventually turned up in Romulus’ care.

He was getting maudlin. This room was turning him into a fool, and another sleepless night loomed ahead, filled with rotten thoughts.
Daken flung his legs to the side of the bed and took some tentative steps around the room. He’d been trying all throughout the past two days, and that afternoon, at lunch, he’d still felt a bit lightheaded.

That didn’t seem to be happening now. He went for the adjacent toilet to relieve himself and eyed the X-branded joggers, t-shirt, hoodie and sneakers that had been left for him. Gabby had looked ecstatic at the sight, and demanded the whole outfit for her too. Daken would rather be caught dead than wearing such low-quality cotton – apparently the school was on a budget, unlike Magneto who’d provided more than acceptable uniforms – but beggars couldn’t be choosers. It was either this, or the hospital clothes.

Once dressed, Daken jogged a little on the spot. He felt better – he was breathing normally, and his heartbeat was steady. He’d eaten the blob they’d given him, drunk their water, and ingested whatever concoction McCoy had decided to try tonight. He’d attempted to sleep, but his brain wouldn’t have it. The X-Men couldn’t certainly say he wasn’t complying.

It was time to test the limits of Pryde’s blanket permission to go about at his leisure.

The woman had stopped by that morning, ostensibly to update him. They were looking for any Soteira bastard who’d managed to evade their grasp. When he felt better, he’d be asked to undergo a brief telepathic eval, to see if he remembered something that could be of use; they wouldn’t dig deeper without his explicit consent, and even so, only if the X-Men were having trouble finding every bastard.

He didn’t look forward to that, but he liked the prospect of some of them being still out there even less, and there was the matter of Jimmy, still M.I.A.

They hadn’t found him yet. Lorna was working with Drake, of all people, and she’d let it slip to the man that she was updating Daken. This had led to Pryde standing at the feet of the bed and ending her debrief with the reason why she’d come to debrief him in the first place: “Please hand over the phone.”

“Not a chance.”

Had he been alone, perhaps Pryde would have tried to overpower him, but – what a fortunate coincidence! – Old Logan had decided to stop by that morning, on his way from a checkup; apparently, he’d discovered he was suffering from adamantium poisoning. They’d got it in time, though, and McCoy was confident he could treat it. Daken had to admit that having Old Logan threateningly sat on the plastic chair, his arms crossed and an unimpressed eyebrow raised, made for an imposing figure.

Emboldened by Pryde’s silence, Daken had gone on: “Feel free to hack it, I have nothing to hide. But I won’t rid myself of my only way to be sure you’re doing your best to find my brother.”

She’d grimaced. “We are doing our best.”

“Results, Pryde. Results.”

In the end, she’d let the matter go with a huff, after an extended pause and a characteristic blank stare that led him to believe she was conversing telepathically with someone.

As he walked the shadowed and empty corridors – he heard mostly snoring from the upper levels – he felt the lightest brush against his consciousness. He’d felt it from time to time over the past two days – so brief one would almost think to have imagined it – but now he apparently had the full attention of whoever was tasked to telepathically check on him tonight. Well, Pryde had said he’d be
monitored; he wouldn’t be surprised if there were also cameras pointed on him.

He wasn’t... as angry about that as he’d thought he’d be, especially after his ordeal. He had the telepaths to thank for his return, after all, and none of them seemed to be snooping around, or else the traps in his mind would have snapped already. He supposed he could tentatively trust them, at least for the moment.

That meant he couldn’t try to pay a visit to the bastard who’d made Daken call him “master”, even if he’d have loved to. He wandered around aimlessly, past labs and classrooms, until he found himself at the entrance.

He stopped dead in his tracks. The windows were rather large, and they showed a good portion of Central Park. It was a clear night, some stars visible despite the smog and the lights of the city.

His nose hit the glass. He found himself leaning against the window, some sense of inexplicable longing in his heart. He ached for clean air – or as clean as it could be in New York – after days stuck in that med bay and days imprisoned inside his own body.

He walked to the front door and wrapped his hand around the knob. He almost expected a spark of electricity to stab his brain in warning, or for Pryde to drop from the ceiling in her nightgown, but the door gave way and he stood there, breathing the cool night air with a sort of exhilarated thrill –

Free. He was free.

It hadn’t registered, perhaps, not until this moment. While rescued, he’d still been holed up and prodded like in any other lab, confined to a bed and stale air.

He was free. He was his own, and he could do whatever the hell he pleased.

His hands thrust in his pockets, he started down the path – not the one leading to the gates, but the one circling the school. So hidden among the green, it could almost feel peaceful.

It was, to a degree. No screaming children, no annoying adults. No monsters in white coats, nor leering in the shadows. Just a quiet lane on a quiet night, after days of horror and tedium. It was nice.

It was obvious it wouldn’t last.

From upwind came a whiff of a scent he’d thought he’d never smell again. Its owner stilled, catching sight of him, and they were left stranded, staring at each other from opposite ends of a fork.

Logan cursed under his breath, hastily muttered an apology, and made to retrace his steps. Daken could let him go, perhaps. He could leave this to another day.

But it was bound to happen, eventually – and, perhaps, the sooner the better.

“Logan,” he called out, making his way towards his father. Logan was frozen, gazing at him almost fearfully. It was inevitable, after how things had ended between them: a good old assisted suicide performed by an unaware assistant, followed by a Death Seed-tinged beating.

He liked to think he wouldn’t have dragged out Logan’s beating for so long, if he hadn’t been possessed. But the truth was that he couldn’t know.

He did regret it. Their last fight had been brutal, and the fact that it was the last memory he had of Logan had shaken him badly, after the news of his death. He supposed he’d gone through all stages of grief and beyond. Oh, he’d thought he was happy, at first. Glad that Logan had kicked the bucket.
But he’d ended up mourning what-could-have-beens, replaying unlikely scenarios in his head. It was a wonder the Seed hadn’t taken a hold of him then, but perhaps he’d simply been too pathetic.

“I wasn’t trailing you, son,” Logan rushed to say as soon as they came face to face. “Just taking a stroll.”

“I know.” Daken shook his head. “You wouldn’t have let me catch your scent like this.” Logan seemed at a loss for words; expecting blows and scathing words and general violence. It had always been the only language they could speak.

No more.

“Walk with me?” Daken motioned to the path and Logan started, then nodded, always with that befuddled expression on his face.

It was understandable, though. It was strange to walk like this, in silence, wariness seeping from them both despite his best efforts. Some part of Daken still crawled at being so close, instinct telling him to fight, to tear at Logan for a long list of wrongs – both true and imagined. But he was tired of fighting this fight. He’d gained some perspective.

That didn’t mean that finding a conversational topic wasn’t hard. What could he say? ‘So, you’re alive?’ ‘Hey, pops, remember that time I tortured you for aeons, that time I made you kill me, that time you carved my claws out of me and took Romulus from me and just told me you’d taken care of him, all the times we stuck our claws into each other’? Logan must be battling the same dilemma.

Daken cleared his throat, making Logan jump. “So. What brings you out this fine night?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” Logan grunted.

Daken hummed. “Your lovers couldn’t keep you company?” Their scents coiled heavily around Logan. They made Daken’s stomach churn – but his mother was dead. She’d been for so long. Daken shouldn’t hold Logan accountable because the man had decided to move on from her.

Logan paused, perhaps trying to read his tone. “They know when I need to stay alone,” he said eventually.

“A good skill to have,” Daken agreed amiably. That seemed to reassure Logan that they weren’t inches away from a clawfight, and he relaxed.

“You?” he said hesitantly.

“Couldn’t sleep either, unsurprisingly.” Daken kicked a small pebble off the path. “I wonder why.”

“We’ll get them,” Logan growled lowly. “We’ll get every single one of them.”

Kids usually wanted their father to drive away the monster hiding in the shadows. Logan hadn’t managed to, but this could be a good compromise, if Daken was willing to see it as such.

“I’m sure we will,” he said – encompassing them both in that statement, showing Logan there was an us. “We’ll make them pay for what they did to us.”

There was a brief moment of silence – Logan held his breath, catching Daken’s meaning – and then Logan sighed. “How are you holding up, son?”

Daken chuckled. “You know, Laura asked me that exact same thing. That’s a silly question, don’t
you think? How could I possibly be holding up?"

“Laura worries about you,” Logan said quietly, wonder in his voice. Daken felt his features soften.

“Yes, she’s always taking care of me.” She’d dragged him out of his mind with the same firmness that constantly surprised him; she was the family he’d never had.

Logan nodded to himself. “She was desperate to find you. She didn’t stop until she found a way – it’s good, to see you together.” He hesitated. “You care for her.”

“She’s my sister,” Daken said simply. “We’ve been through a lot.” He fidgeted, unsure. Logan seemed to be trying to circle back to the two of them, but Daken didn’t know if he could face that conversation yet. So much bad blood, so many lies. Such pain they’d both inflicted to each other. Couldn’t Logan content himself with this simple conversation? “There was many a time I wouldn’t have survived without her,” he said offhandedly, hoping Logan would focus on that piece of information – interrogate him on their “adventures”, perhaps.

But Logan wasn’t listening, stuck on something – his gaze pensive, sad. “She told me I fucked you up,” he murmured. Daken shut his eyes. “And I think she was right. Son –”

“But Logan –” Daken begged. It wasn’t the time. Perhaps it never would be. “Just don’t, Logan.”

“I need to -”

“What about what I need?” It came out harsher than intended. Daken took a deep breath, stared up at the sky. They’d both stopped walking – two ghosts looming on the ground, stuck on the past. It couldn’t do. “There’s too much baggage between us, Logan. We’ll never make anything that happened right. It’s been years, and you were dead, and I – I had to make my peace with it without you.”

Logan hung his head.

“I just wish I’d listened,” he muttered, dejected. Daken didn’t want to hear it. It brought it all back – all his rage at Logan’s blindness, at his self-pity, at his unique way of making Daken’s pain all about him. “I wish I’d been there for you, son, and helped you -”

“You were decades late,” Daken snapped, hoping to shut him up – to manage to hold the resentment at bay. He didn’t want to turn this conversation into a fight. “Nothing you could have done – nothing – would have helped me.” That was, ultimately, true. Daken had been doomed from the moment he’d seen Logan – wired to hate him, whatever his father did and said. Even when he’d learnt the truth about his mother’s death, his hate had turned into a resentment that couldn’t be dispelled. Only Logan’s death had brought him some perspective; and he’d be damned if he let Logan wipe out all the work he’d done on himself.

“I should have let you handle Romulus,” Logan murmured – that name falling off his lips was like a shock of cold water. Logan had no right to name him… he had no idea what he was talking about… He’d had no right. No right to finish Romulus off. It should have been Daken to deal the killing blow –

“Yes, you should have,” Daken choked out. Perhaps it was time to call it a night – retire before he did something he’d regret, like gutting Logan. Such an action would put him at odds with the whole school, too – and probably with Laura. “It should have been me to kill him, not you. But it’s no use talking about it, Logan. He’s dead, and that’s all that matters.” It had to be all that mattered. It wasn’t enough, but he had to make due.
Logan fell silent, finally shut up, and Daken resumed to walk. He’d leave it at that, leave Logan there. He’d round the school and then go back to his room. This hadn’t been too bad, as a first conversation could have gone. They hadn’t shouted. They hadn’t fought. Logan was giving him space –

“Son,” Logan spoke up. Something in his voice – a chilling dread – made Daken stop in his tracks. He turned; Logan was very pale, his lips moving and moving, but nothing came out, as if he was shell-shocked.

It made Daken’s blood run cold. He reached his father again, battling against his instinct telling him to run, run, run. He wouldn’t like whatever Logan had to say. That was a certainty, one he felt in his bones. He was shaking, as if he could tell already the news. There was only one reason why Logan would look at him like that. Only one reason why all the hairs in Daken’s body stood on end. He felt it, because he was conditioned to; fangs gleaming in the dark and eyes made of nothing and nails as sharp as razors –

“Son.” Logan grabbed his arm. Daken shook him off, feeling hot and cold, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe.

“He’s not dead,” he wheezed. “He’s alive, isn’t he? Alive, and well, roaming the world, ready to take me, ready to -”

“He’s in prison,” Logan ground out. “He’s locked up real good, he can’t escape. I swear, son, he can’t do anything to you -”

Daken laughed. It was hysterical, how Logan thought that Romulus could only hurt him if he was close. A real blast. Oh, a good joke, such a funny joke –

“Son, I swear to you -” Logan tried to touch him, again. Daken unsheathed his claws, stopping short of actually plunging them into Logan’s stomach. This wasn’t how it should have gone. He was doing so well, God, so well. Dreadful, but on the right path, he’d thought. And instead, instead –

Logan attempted again to clasp his arm and Daken slashed, again stopping inches from Logan’s flesh. Logan didn’t even try to parry and that somehow enraged Daken even more. “Don’t think I won’t stab you!” he snarled. “Why did you tell me you’d killed him if you hadn’t? Do you have any idea how I felt, lying there, taking your punishment -” he shuddered, stopped that train of thought. “I had to tell myself it was fine, that at least you’d handled it, daddy was taking care of me,” he spat, mockingly, venom surging out like on his worst days, like when he was a lesser person, a worse person, a bitter, ugly person – the worst part of himself. “You should have told me he was alive. As a courtesy, at least, since you obviously don’t care, you never cared -”

“Son, I do. I swear I do -”

And oh, God, the worst part was that Logan sounded so convinced. So sure. So maddeningly, ridiculously sure. The man just had no fucking clue. It was -

Exhausting.

Daken took a step back, trying to regulate his breathing – he had to calm down. No good would come from this. He had to focus, and reassess.

He wouldn’t let Logan pull him into the void again. He was better. He was a better person now. He would not fall into old habits.

He retracted his claws.
“Son -” Logan reached out – stopped, when he saw Daken’s face.

“Don’t talk to me ever again,” Daken said quietly. “I’ll stay, we’ll work together, we’ll hunt those bastards down. But we’re through, Logan. We’re through.”

Logan’s hand fell to his side, and he nodded, not daring saying anything.

Daken walked past him, and retraced his steps without looking back.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Laura supports her brother.

[Well, this was bound to happen. I wonder if you’d seen it coming? I tried not to be too on the nose with the references in earlier chapters. While Logan does tell Daken on panel that Romulus’ “gone,” and he takes care to add that he isn’t dead... he then goes on to stab Daken and take his Muramasa wrist claws out. Those took ages to heal, since the metal affected Daken’s healing factor: we see Daken’s scars too. Ergo, Daken must have been feverish for a good while there, slipping in and out of consciousness. So that got me thinking, what if Daken doesn’t even clearly remember how that conversation went, especially since afterwards, in all of his solos, he never expresses the desire to look for Romulus even though he was on record saying he wanted to kill him? What if he simply thinks that Logan killed him? And that’s how we got here!
I think there are a lot of things these two need to talk about.
I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Do tell me what you think, your comments make my day! ^-^ ]
Laura supports her brother.

Chapter Notes

**Additional Warnings:** mentions of suicidal behavior.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

20.

“I can’t believe he kept it secret,” Laura said.

She looked ready to wage war on his behalf, her green eyes blazing with seething fury. It would be a sight, for sure, but it was enough to know that she had his back.

Daken sighed. “I can.”

Laura clasped his hand. Her warmth was welcome; he kept breaking out into shivers that had nothing to do with the cold.

When she’d walked into the med bay, that morning, Gabby tailing her with sleep-filled eyes, it had taken just one look at him to know something was wrong. She’d sent Gabby away with the promise of letting her know when he felt better – Gabby had half-hugged him through the covers and told him to take care – and then, slowly and gently, managed to coax him first out of bed and then out of the room, to then drag him outside to catch a bit of fresh hair. They’d walked to a secluded part of the yard, hidden enough from the park too, and she’d made him sit on a bench. He moved like wading in water – every motion heavy. They’d sat silently for what felt like hours, but it couldn’t have been that long.

Eventually, she’d told him that she’d come that early because, upon waking up, Jean had alerted her. The woman hadn’t disclosed anything, proving to be the discreet person she’d said she was; but she’d told Laura to go check on him. And Laura had brought Gabby, thinking she could cheer him up, but she’d known as soon as she got in that he wasn’t in the mood. It saddened him, but that was probably true. He couldn’t sour Gabby’s cheerfulness, he wouldn’t forgive himself for it.

“So,” Laura had concluded, “We’re going to sit here and enjoy some quiet. And you don’t have to tell me anything, Daken. But know I’m here to listen.”

“You should be with Jubilee,” he’d muttered. He smelt the woman on her, and he could guess where Laura had spent the night. He couldn’t be such a burden on her shoulders; Laura deserved happiness. She was so well-balanced – the best of them.

“I should be with my brother,” she’d stated firmly, and that had been the last they’d said for a good while.

He’d sat there, breathing in the warm air, gazing around without seeing anything – her steadfast presence at his side the only reason why he didn’t fall into pieces.

He felt on the verge to. As if he stood on the edge of insanity, everything come crashing down on
him. There was never a day when he didn’t linger on his wretched past, but now the dam had
broken.

For so long, he’d thought he could scrape by – overcome what had been done to him. And, bit by
excruciating bit, he’d thought he was making it. He was getting well. Of course, it was a bumpy
road, but he was getting there. He could never forget decades of abuse, but he could rest easily,
knowing his tormentor was gone.

When the Death Seed had been wiped out of him and he’d realized everything he’d done while
under its influence – especially to Zach – the ghost of Romulus had reappeared, leering like in
Daken’s worst nightmares, the monster’s favorite motto engraved in Daken’s mind: *quod sum eris, ‘I
am what you will be’*. He’d battled with it – with the panicked horror of thinking he’d almost turned
into the monster – for so long. Hell, it was the reason why he’d almost let go just a few days prior.

But all that grief and all that pain had somehow been made a bit bearable by the fact that Romulus
was gone, dead, taken care of. And suddenly discovering that he wasn’t, that he still breathed, that he
still lived, with just thin walls, even if thousands of miles away, between them – it made it all
pointless. All his efforts, all his frail certainties – gone like they never existed, like he was a fool to
even think it could ever be enough.

And Logan, God, Logan – going around like it was nothing, lying to him by omission, making him
think he was safe, when instead there was no place on Earth where he could run… Logan, who
thought everything was fine, who suspected their relationship though he couldn’t imagine the
horrifying depths of it – he’d thought that simply carting Romulus off was enough. He that had killed
his own tormentors for surely far less, had thought that a prison would be punishment enough for his
son’s tormentor.

But the fact was that he couldn’t know. Daken had never told him anything. And this sliver of
rationality – telling him he couldn’t hate Logan for not acting on something he didn’t even know –
was driving him mad.

Because hating Logan would be oh so easier. How life had been simpler when Logan was the
boogeyman, the reason for everything wrong in Daken’s life, the target of his rage! But Logan had
just omitted to tell him that Romulus was *alive*. Hardly unforgivable, right?

He’d found himself laughing hysterically. Laura had held him through it, and, true to her word, she
hadn’t asked him anything, not even when his laughter had turned into sobs, his fingers digging into
her arms.

But when even those had died down, Daken had talked. He felt clear-headed – lucid. He’d told her
everything – his nighttime walk with Logan. His attempt to be civil. The truth choking him, a large
clawed hand around his throat, his little feet kicking only air, knowing there was no escape –

She knew nothing about Logan’s lies, he smelt it on her. Not that he’d entertained any doubts; she’d
have told him.

She squeezed his hand. “How are you feeling?” she murmured.

“Stupid.” He grimaced. She cocked her head, giving him time to elaborate. “Stupid I could trust a
word Logan said. Stupid I could think we might mend even a bit of what was broken. Stupid I could
think I was safe -” his voice cracked.

“You are safe,” she said fiercely. “You aren’t alone anymore. We’ll take care of you.”
“We?” He shook his head. There was no ‘we’, not when Romulus was involved. He couldn’t let her put herself in harm’s way.

“Your family,” Laura told him – the word made his chest ache, but it couldn’t do. “Me, and Gabby -”

“Laura, he’s dangerous.”

“He’s locked up. He can’t hurt you, not physically.” She placed a hand over his heart, as if she needed that to sense his frantic heartbeat. “It’s your mind he’s hurting, even now. Thinking of him harms you.” Her gaze was pensive, though she looked clearly at him. “You need help I know not how to give,” she murmured.

“Help?” From any other, her words would have made him rage. She had that same expression Logan had worn at the beginning, when he still thought that Daken was a poor unfortunate soul, before Daken did everything he could to make his life a living hell, to stop him from looking at Daken that accursed way. It wasn’t pity, not quite. It was mingled with the need to do something and the self-deprecating certainty that nothing would be enough. It used to drive him mad.

But Laura was his sister and he knew she had his best interest at heart. He knew she loved him. He knew he did need help, even though he still couldn’t say it out loud. And she’d helped him, more than once – always there for him, a steadfast presence at his side.

So he resolved to listen, because she was his sister and she knew him better than most.

She squeezed his hand. “Your mind’s scarred. He hurt you so much, and I can’t do anything about it. But Jean can.” He suppressed the protestations almost out of his lips; the notion of a telepath rummaging through his mind made him shudder, but he’d decided to let Laura speak. “She spoke of scars in your mind. Of traps. She wants to help you, Daken.”

He mulled that over. The woman had seemed earnest, and truthful. She was even keeping her distance, and that spoke of a respect he wouldn’t have expected.

But ‘help’ him? And do what? Disarm the traps in his mind, perhaps, and so leave him defenseless to any telepath seeking to control him, to any chemical that was created? And the wounds she spoke about – how could she possibly heal them?

And why would she knowingly walk into a minefield that had crippled her mentor? Why would she expose herself to such a risk? She must have sensed the strength of Romulus’ handiwork – a blend of mild telepathy and sheer trauma, beaten into Daken through years of careful work. Why would she willingly touch that?

“Her younger counterpart,” Laura added softly, filling his silence, “helped me a lot.” Yes, he knew that; teen Jean had relieved Laura of the compulsion of the trigger scent. He still berated himself for not being able to be there for his sister when she’d battled that demon Kimura, her sadistic ex-handler. “If she could do it, if she could help me find myself – imagine what her adult self can do. She has a practiced hold on her powers, Daken. She’s the best you could have.”

He wouldn’t be so sure. He’d sensed how strong she was, but she hadn’t truly delved into his mind. “That’s dangerous, what you’re talking about. It might endanger the both of us. I don’t think she’d agree to it, Laura.”

“She’s the one who wants to try,” Laura murmured, taking him by surprise. “She’s waiting for you to feel better before she asks you, but I can’t see you like this. I had to tell you this is an option.”
“But why?” He shook his head. The challenge, perhaps? No, she didn’t strike him as that kind of person. A sudden thought made him seethe: “Did Logan put her up to this?”

“No, Daken.” Laura squeezed his hand – she looked sad. “She despises what was done to you.” He recoiled, wondering what did the woman know – she’d said she wouldn’t pry, but he had no way of knowing if that was true. Of course, she hadn’t triggered anything off, but if she was so strong, perhaps she could travel his mind, unnoticed. “We saw something, when we helped you come back. There was a – a darkness, all around your mind,” Laura continued, unable to mask a shudder. “A void.”

He shuddered too, cold and uncomfortable – tried to channel some anger, to deflect his own thoughts. He wasn’t angry with Laura – he could never be – but with the woman, for daring to lie to him. She’d said she wouldn’t pry – how stupid of him to trust her words. “And so she went and took a look.”

“No, Daken.” Laura caught his other hand too, joined them between her own. He let her. “She didn’t – that which we saw was just on the surface. Is it so hard to believe that someone would rage at knowing you were raised by a madman to be a weapon?”

That was all Grey knew, then. Something she could easily have heard from Logan. She must have also picked on other things in the library where he’d dragged himself to die, but perhaps she was keeping her counsel. Perhaps she was trustworthy.

And, too, she was an idealist. A compassionate leader, seeking to right every wrong. He was, perhaps, to be her pet project. “She thinks she can wave her hands and make me better? And you think that would work, Laura?” he asked, genuinely curious. Laura had never been this foolish. She was pragmatic; precise. “You didn’t get better just because little Jean stayed in your mind for a bit. All she did was ridding you of that wretched thing.”

Her eyes flashed. “It helped me, knowing that I wasn’t to be a slave of the trigger scent anymore. If you think that was a small thing –”

“No, of course not,” he agreed, his chest aching at realizing he’d just hurt her. He hadn’t meant to. “But that’s just the thing, Laura. It gave you peace of mind, yes, but you were already there, weren’t you? Kimura’s return was a nightmare for you precisely because you were fine. You always were stronger, Laura. And I…” He lowered his head, words failing him. He’d thought he was strong, but he’d never been. The independence he’d always so loudly declared was a sham. He just kept drifting, faking everything. He’d had to, to survive, but deep down, he’d always known it was a lie. And when he’d thought he’d escaped Romulus’ shadow, he’d just kept faking it. Because he had no idea how to function, not really. And the discovery of Romulus’ continued existence just confirmed this truth.

“It took me a lot of time to get there, Daken,” Laura murmured. “I know how hard it can be. And I truly think that Jean can help you. That’s for you to decide. But one thing, one thing I want you to know.” She brought a hand to his face, tilted his head up. Her gaze was kind and firm and understanding and it shattered him to his core. “You are strong. You’re the strongest person I know. You’re a survivor.”

“Laura,” he croaked. She was speaking nonsense. He was nothing of the sort; he was just a fool.

“You keep fighting back,” she said fiercely. “He didn’t hold you down, Daken. You didn’t let him. You aren’t letting him, and you’re strong for this. Please tell me you understand it.” There were lines on her face – she was breathing as if holding back tears. And he hated that. He didn’t want her to suffer for his sake.
“I do,” he lied. The corner of her mouth turned downwards.

“You don’t,” she murmured, squinting her eyes. “But you will, one day. I promise you that. I’ll do everything to make you see that.”

It was a pointless endeavor, but he loved her too much to squash her hopes like this. She was trying, bless her; she cared about him so much.

It still struck him, sometimes.

He smiled, tasting tears on his lips. “Thank you, Laura.”

She shook her head. “No, thank you.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “For what? Crying all over you?”

She squeezed his hand. “For trusting me. I know how difficult this is.”

“Of course I trust you.” It rolled so easily off his lips. Had he truly never told her before?

She grimaced a smile. “For trusting the X-Men, then. For not running away after tonight. I know it took a lot.” Her gaze softened. “I’m proud of you.”

He felt warm all over. He hadn’t battled with his decision to stay – he still had things to do here, and ties too – but her support touched him. “You’re just glad I didn’t stab Logan,” he smirked, attempting to defuse the moment. He could fake it, for her sake. Reward her unwavering trust with some hope. He wasn’t fine and he’d never be, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t at least appease her in this small way. Show her he could still bite, somewhat.

A shadow passed over her face. “I’d have given you a pass for that.”

And that, despite everything – despite the darkness chasing him, the desperation seeping through – made him laugh. Just a short, cracked sound, maybe veering too much towards a sob… but he laughed.

No, he wouldn’t actually do it. Logan simply wasn’t worth it. He had worse things to worry about than a disrespectful father. But this confirmation that she’d be with him through thick and thin – although he should really know it by now – shook him to his core.

God, he loved his sister.

Chapter End Notes

Next: A surprise visit.

[I know I’ve been mentioning the siblings’ heart-to-hearts for a while now, but I’d never gotten to write one out as it happens. I’m glad I finally managed to. I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Let me know what you think, your comments make my day ^-^ ]
They’d just come in sight of the entrance when Jean contacted her.

Laura had somehow managed to mask her worry, letting Daken pretend he felt better. There was no use pushing him now; she didn’t want to estrange him, and she knew very well these things took time. It was enough that she’d planted the seed, so that he wouldn’t chase Jean away at her first try.

She truly thought that the woman could help.

He was gaunt. Perhaps he didn’t notice, or he didn’t care, but he couldn’t hide his pain as well as he thought he was. She was accustomed to his black moods – she’d witnessed them more than once, attempted to nurse him back to health only to see him swipe it all under a carpet every time – but this time it was worse. The news had hit him hard. Perhaps he thought he was fooling her now, walking beside her on the path, his hands thrust in his pockets, bravado in his steps, sneering at the students gaping at him… but there were lines on his face that he couldn’t hide. Dark bags under his eyes, that were so terribly bright. He almost looked as if he were running a fever, but he was at peak health.

Physically.

Mentally, he was struggling, and her heart ached so. It hurt, to know he was hurting; to know she couldn’t relieve him, not like he needed to. Oh, she could listen, and that would help him momentarily – but his wounds run far deeper than what some conversations on a bench could heal. She knew the value of friends, of knowing someone was there – but that wouldn’t be enough. She feared the moment he’d break. She feared she couldn’t be there for him when it happened.

So, when Jean said her name in Laura’s mind, Laura flung herself at the telepath.

_Help him_, she begged. Jean held her gently.

_I’ll do that_, she assured Laura. _But it will take time_. Laura heard a kind reproach in the woman’s words.

She wouldn’t apologize for cutting in Jean’s cautious approach. _You’re wasting time. Precious time. Don’t you see him?_ She hastily opened up her mind, so that Jean would experience what Laura was experiencing, see and smell what she sensed.

Jean seemed to recoil. _Yes, I see. But I’m not wasting time, Laura. This, too, is part of the process._

_But he’s suffering!_ If she saw Logan now, she thought she might hit him. Daken had been trying. Really, truly trying. And Logan had gone and unraveled it all with his carelessness. _You witnessed_
their conversation, didn’t you? Why didn’t you intervene? Why didn’t you wake me up?

Daken wouldn’t have liked that, Jean said calmly. I can’t establish trust if I interfere like that, Laura. I was on high alert – we all were – ready to intervene if he did something drastic. But he also needed to know we can keep our distance.

… In the interest of your therapy, Laura guessed. She saw it now: by ‘keeping her distance’, Jean was showing Daken that she was trustworthy. It would help to convince him she was serious about her proposal.

Exactly. Jean sighed. I promise, Laura – I want to help him, and I will.

All right, Laura capitulated. She sensed honesty in Jean’s voice, and genuine worry. The woman knew what she was doing; Laura should trust her on this. But please, don’t wait too long.

I won’t, Jean reassured her. Then she continued: Now listen, please.

Laura did. She listened attentively to what Jean told her, and when the woman was finished, Laura returned her attention to her surroundings. They’d stopped walking; Daken was peering at her, curiosity in his tired eyes.

“You were miles away,” he said quietly. She grimaced.

“Yes, sorry. It was Jean.” She hesitated.

He crunched up his nose. “She wants me already?”

“No.” She laid a hand on his arm to steer him towards another bench. “She told me that Hank wants to see you in his laboratory – please, sit.”

“All right.” He indulged her, worry now visible on his features. “Is this about my powers? Has he reached a conclusion?” His fingers twitched with nervousness.

“No, and so he asked for a consultation. Reed Richards’ here. They’ll examine you.” She paused, wondering how to broach the subject. He was susceptible to it; always so terribly testy at the mere mention. The timing, too, wasn’t ideal.

“Richards himself?” Daken made a face. “Well, he did treat me. I guess that’s why McCoy contacted him?” Laura nodded, looking for clues in his expression; waiting to see if it came to his mind on its own – if he showed any uneasiness. Sure enough, a shadow passed over his face. “You’re keeping me here because of my bombing?” he said casually, waving off what he must have thought. “Grey sensed some aversion to me in Richards’ mind? It was years ago.” There it was, again: a faint grimace, a twitch of pain she’d seen numerous times. Laura sighed and joined her hands in front of her. This wouldn’t be easy.

“No. Richards came with company. Johnny Sto-” she trailed off at seeing how fast Daken’s expression closed… but not so fast to mask the flash of regret in his eyes. She knew that reaction; she’d witnessed it enough times. “From what Jean could glean, he invited himself as soon as he heard why Richards was coming here,” she said crisply, giving him the facts. Daken was slowly lowering his head, averting his gaze from her. “She didn’t sense any animosity; if anything, Storm’s here in support. He’s worried about you.” Daken shut his eyes. “You’re strained enough,” she said just as matter-of-factly, so that he’d know where she stood on this. “I’ll remove him, if you need that.”

She didn’t have the specifics. She didn’t know what, exactly, had happened between her brother and
Johnny Storm. But she could venture a guess. She knew her brother, how self-destructive he could be. She knew the Baxter Building had never made sense from a strategic viewpoint, when he’d bombed half of New York as his swan song.

She knew he cherished a shirt with the Fantastic Four logo, and he wore it when he felt particularly morose.

And she knew that the mere mention of Johnny Storm was enough to depress him even when he truly felt better.

Given his current state of mind, Storm’s presence couldn’t possibly be of help. But he had to decide that. Jean had been right to warn Laura – she didn’t know anything from Daken’s side, but she’d seen enough in Storm’s mind to make the right decision.

Daken still hadn’t answered. Laura crouched in front of him, reached out to clasp his hand. He let her. His skin was still clammy, like earlier, and there was a crease in his forehead. “Whatever you need,” she said softly. “Do you want me to make him leave?”

He began to nod, then he shook his head, his breath a little labored. “… I haven’t seen him in years,” he finally whispered, something broken at the edge of his voice. She squeezed his hand.

“T’ll tell Jean -”

“No.” It came abruptly, seemed to take even him off-guard as he jumped at the sound of his own voice. He opened his eyes, alight with a feverish gaze. “I want to. To see him.”

She grimaced. “Are you sure?” He sounded like he was trying to convince himself. She didn’t like it; she didn’t want him to put himself under even more strain.

“Yes.” He went to his feet, dragging her up with newfound strength. “Come on, lead the way.”

She still wasn’t sure, but she knew that expression. He wouldn’t take no for an answer.

He walked quickly, to the point where to an outsider it would seem it was him leading her somewhere. He was a man with a mission, and she didn’t quite know what kind of mission. He’d perked up, just a bit; at some point he reached up, tried to smooth the hair that he still hadn’t managed to shave into a mohawk, and hastily pulled it up into a messy bun.

The eagerness didn’t fool her. He was masking his pain with this; focusing on something else, on what she knew was a sore subject, to avoid his nightmares. He was as pale as moments before, his perspiration just as erratic. But he was attempting to coat himself with a layer of normalcy and she found that she couldn’t tear it away from him. He was deflecting, pure and simple, but it was his right.

When they reached Hank’s door, though, he paused. There was doubt in his movements, in the way his gaze shifted almost uncomfortably. She reached out to clasp his hand. “Are you sure?” she said gently. She could still send Storm away, if Daken asked her.

He bit his lower lip, lightly, straightened up, and pushed the door open. “Where do you want me, Drs McCoy and Richards?” he said genially, any trace of unease gone from his voice.

What a consummate actor her brother was. Grimacing, Laura followed him into the room.

“Oh dear.” Hank stood closer to them, half-turned from a hologram he was showing Richards. His gaze trailed over Daken – his expert mind cataloging everything that Daken was trying to hide. One
couldn’t fool Hank, not on the matter of their health. “Are you -”

“Peachy, thank you.” Daken cut him off. “Where do you want me?” he repeated. He was looking
straight at the pair; he didn’t react to the soft gasp coming from his left, not in a way that the owner of
the voice would have noticed. But Laura saw his full-bodied flinch as Storm disentangled his crossed
arms and jumped from the stool he was perched atop, taking a few hesitant steps in Daken’s
direction, a hand held up pleadingly – worry visible on the man’s features. Storm opened his mouth,
but Daken spoke over him, a quiver barely audible in his voice. “Richards! How was space?”

Storm closed his mouth and stilled, his eyes sad.

Richards cocked his head, his gaze hard to read. He was studying Daken, but Laura didn’t know
what he saw. An enemy? The man who’d blown his home up? The man who was causing his
brother-in-law to look so wretched? Or a scientific challenge? The bombing had been years ago,
after all; and Richards had lived through terrible things ever since, dead to the world for long months
until he returned with his wife. “Eventful,” he said eventually. He motioned towards a metal bed.
“We’ll start here, if you will -?”

“Certainly.” Daken was on it in an instant, shedding his clothes after a pause she was sure she was
the only one to notice. To an untrained eye, he was completely focused on the two men at his side,
but his eyes shifted ever so slightly every now and then.

She took a few steps towards them, deciding to ignore Storm for now. The man still hadn’t moved,
his own brother-in-law sparing him no more than a glance. “What are you going to do?” she asked.

“We’ll check him thoroughly,” Richards said, moving around her brother with a sharp focus, a
million instruments in his hands. “I brought my things. I want to make some scans, and do a few
tests, check his chemical and hormonal balance -” His words turned into an unintelligible mumble as
he moved swiftly.

“I take it we’ll be here for a while?” Daken spoke up, raising an arm to let Hank wrap a band around
it. When Hank nodded, her brother turned towards her. “You don’t need to stay, Laura. I’ll be fine.”
That statement elicited a delicate cough from Hank.

“You’ll feel weakened,” he said gently, omitting that Daken looked already worse for wear. “You’ll
need an escort to your room -”

“My sister isn’t my keeper,” Daken said. Richards furrowed his brow at that, and seemed ready for a
lecture, but Daken hadn’t meant to say it in any derogative way.

“I don’t mind,” she said softly. She couldn’t leave him; he needed her.

“I’m sure Jubilee will mind,” he retorted. “You can’t ignore her for me, Laura. I won’t be the reason
why your relationship ends.” Richards hummed and bit down whatever he’d been about to say, his
lean fingers dancing on a tablet now.

Laura reached the trio. “She knows how important you are to me, Daken,” she murmured. He
looked away, almost embarrassed. “She doesn’t mind.”

She really didn’t. Jubilee understood, most of all, that sometimes one’s time isn’t one’s own. She had
been nothing but understanding about Laura’s continuous visits to Daken; the previous night, a
moment they’d carefully managed to carve for themselves, had turned into a manifestation of worry
on Laura’s part, and Jubilee had been fantastic, holding her and brushing her hair and placing soft,
warm kisses atop her head. She hadn’t lamented Laura’s rather single-minded focus on her brother,
that was preventing them from enjoying each other’s company; she’d just held her.

The memory of leaving Jubilee still sleeping soundly that morning ashamed Laura a bit. But Jubilee understood.

“You don’t smell so convinced yourself,” Daken said gently. “Really, Laura, it’s all right. You can go,” he nudged her with a knee.

“Stay still, please,” Richards all but snapped. Daken rolled his eyes.

“Yes, doctor.” Then he looked up at her. “This will be tedious, and you can use the time. You ditched her to come to my aid, didn’t you?” He nodded sagely as she grimaced despite herself. “Go. You already did a lot for me.” His features softened.

She didn’t think she’d done much. She’d held him, and listened, and comforted him, but it wasn’t enough. It couldn’t be.

And he was being prodded and examined. That could bring back upsetting things, fragments of his imprisonment perhaps, or even worse. She couldn’t leave him alone to face it.

Well, he wasn’t alone. But Hank and Richards would be too focused on the puzzle to pay attention, and Storm –

She had no idea what he was doing here. He still hadn’t said a word; he hovered nervously nearby, exuding worry and concern, but it was like there was a wall between him and Daken – her brother studiously avoided looking at him, but she was sure he was well aware of every little movement of the man.

Perhaps Daken wanted her gone to properly face him. She was his little sister and he clearly had history with Storm; perhaps he even feared some retribution, despite her telling him what Jean had sensed in Storm’s mind, and he didn’t want her there – perhaps thinking he’d deserve it.

She pursed her lips. If he left him to it, he would probably seek out punishment, perhaps by goading Storm. She couldn’t let him hurt himself.

She squeezed his hand. “I’ll stay for a little while yet,” she said softly.

He sighed and nodded, his eyes shifting, for a moment, towards Storm – he knew what had prompted her decision. He knew she understood him. And that she’d be there for him.

He squeezed her hand in return, laid back his head, and let the doctors work.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Logan talks with Betsy.

[I feel compelled to warn that not only do I ship Daken and Johnny Storm – they’re also an OTP of mine. So expect their previous relationship to be analyzed ^^” but I’m leaving some mystery as to whether it will be rekindled :P

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Let me know what you think, your comments make my
day ^.-^ ]
“So, why didn’t you tell him?”

Logan didn’t look up. He was attempting meditation on the rooftop and he’d just barely managed to send away ‘Ro and Kurt. They kept telling him he was handling this wrong, bless them. Perhaps they were right. No, scratch that; most assuredly, they were.

But he couldn’t stop picturing Daken’s face the previous night – his terror, his pain. The wreck in his voice. And he knew, without a doubt, that he’d fucked up.

Warmth beside him. Betsy hadn’t taken his silence for an answer, and she was sitting cross-legged less than a foot away from him. He ignored her, but she was nothing but stubborn.

“I’m not asking why you didn’t tell him Romulus was alive. From what I gathered, you had.” She must have been talking with ’Ro. Logan was torn between exasperation and fond gratitude. “I’m asking why you didn’t defend yourself tonight. Why you let him leave with that assumption.”

‘Assumption’ - it was anything but. Daken must misremember. He hadn’t been playing some game… Logan had heard it in his voice. He was convinced that what he was saying was true. Convinced that Logan had told him a lie.

He’d gone on for years, convinced that the monster was gone, and then he’d suddenly found out that it wasn’t true. The raw emotion in his voice – the sheer terror – hadn’t been a ruse, and had clenched hard Logan’s heart. And that other accusation that Daken had half-flung at him before hastily cutting off… that had made Logan’s hair stand on end.

Logan had never stopped to think how the events of that day had affected Daken. He’d trapped Romulus, disposed of the perceived threat Daken posed, and then gone about his day, focused on his own self-loathing. He’d just left Daken in a motel to heal from the wounds Logan himself had inflicted, as the sight of his feverish son hurt him terribly. He hadn’t even stuck around enough to make sure Daken did heal.

Betsy sighed. “Why do you feel the need to self-sabotage, Logan?”

He wasn’t self-sabotaging. He’d fucked up, for God’s sake. “Kid’s got a right to be angry,” he ground out, hoping to shut her up.

Vain hope. She took it as encouragement. “Why don’t you tell me what happened? In your own words.”
That felt extremely condescending. But he supposed he deserved it. “You know what happened.” Even if she hadn’t been there to witness their fight the previous night, ’Ro must have told her. As she must have told her what Logan had recounted when he’d come back to their room, shaken by the meeting.

“You know, I really don’t,” Betsy said primly. “Indulge me. Maybe talking out loud will help you see things differently.”

Well, he wouldn’t manage to meditate today: she was on the warpath. He turned towards her; she wasn’t looking at him, she was just gazing serenely at the view, her mauve hair flowing in the wind. She looked more relaxed than the first time he’d seen her back in this body; there was a softness to her features, and Jean’s scent lingered by her.

“What are you doing here?” he asked her.

She cocked her head. “I’m trying to help a friend, Logan.”

He shrugged. “Think Jean might have rubbed off on you, with her idea that I need therapy.”

She flushed, sensing that he’d smelt Jean on her. Good for them. Not what he’d ever imagined would happen, but good for them. He was especially glad that Jeannie wasn’t stuck on mourning Slim. “We can make this conversation what you want it to be, Logan,” Betsy said curtly. “I’m not trying to force anything on you.”

He had to bark a laughter at that. “You just came here to molest me while I was trying to meditate.”

“Believe me, it wasn’t working.” She tapped two fingers against her temple.

Yes, she would know. Logan sighed heavily and turned to face her fully. “You want to know what happened.”

She nodded.

“What you’re comfortable talking about, Logan,” Betsy said softly. Strong words, for one who’d just bullied him into complying.

But perhaps he could tell her. Betsy seemed to have an understanding of her son, a newfound sort of respect; and she’d never shied away from criticizing Logan before. Nor had his partners, ever – neither ’Ro nor Kurt had even minced their words when they thought Logan was in the wrong – but somehow, their support now struck him as too kind and not enough objective. Betsy, on the other hand, shared no love and intimacy with Logan, and her words would ring differently.

He rubbed at his neck. “I got it all wrong,” he began. Betsy let him talk, the uttermost concentration on her features. “I thought he wanted to take Romulus’ place, become a shadow at the top of a criminal empire. There was that, too, of course, but I stopped at the surface. I let his mask tell me the lies he wanted to tell me, and he was only trying to protect himself after he reached out and never got nothing. I only saw a threat, Betsy. It was my boy and I only ever saw a threat.” He hung his head.

“I hid Romulus and told him he was gone. That he’d never take his place. But I had to make sure he wouldn’t try anything. He had these weapons embedded in him, weapons that could kill Romulus. And I -”

He felt bile rush up his throat as Daken’s words from the previous night echoed in his ears, sick and violent and repulsed. Logan had recoiled so hard at hearing them – at understanding that, for a
moment, Daken had conflated him with Romulus.

‘Do you have any idea how I felt, lying there, taking your punishment?’

When Logan had declawed him, his son had just let him. He was greatly weakened by their fight, by the wound in his chest. He was looking away with unfocused eyes as Logan carefully carved his forearms and extracted his wrist claws, and Logan had pretended not to see the tears rolling down his son’s face. He’d thought he was doing the right thing, and seeing his son like that had been a punch to the guts, and it was easier to ignore it. It was easier to just go about doing the deed and leave. It was easier to think his son’s meek demeanor was a morose admission of defeat.

And instead – instead. Daken hadn’t seen his father, in that moment. He’d just seen another master, bestowing a punishment upon him for daring to act out. For daring to rebel against the monster who’d made his life a living hell.

No wonder Daken’s hate for him had fortified, after that. No wonder he’d sought out more power even more desperately.

In Daken’s mind, addled by his injuries, Logan had killed Romulus. He’d established himself as stronger than Daken, as his superior, to be obeyed and feared; and he’d taken vengeance from Daken’s hands. He’d rid him of the catharsis of killing his tormentor of long bloody years. That, too, Logan had done out of love, knowing well how revenge poisons one’s life. He’d thought he was doing the right thing. God damn him, he’d really thought he had it all figured out.

What a fool.

Fate had given him a chance to right that wrong, some time later. When Romulus had escaped the Darkforce dimension, Logan hadn’t even thought about warning Daken, fearful the boy would jump at the opportunity to seize power. When he’d finally managed to trap Romulus and imprison him in an impenetrable fortress, though, that would have been a good time to tell his son. Tell him that Romulus was alive, but unreachable. Daken would have hated him for that, but at least he’d have known. Logan would have taken that gladly.

And he would, now. It was only what he deserved.

Betsy held up a hand. Up until now she’d listened quietly and intently, never showing what she thought of what he was saying, her features carefully neutral. Now, though, there was a crease in her brow.

“What?” he choked out. There was a raw lump in his throat.

Betsy sighed. “You aren’t Daken’s scapegoat anymore, Logan. You need to stop this. Neither of you deserves this.”

Her words made no sense. This wasn’t about scapegoats; he’d constantly failed his son, from the first day of his life. It was only right that he finally took some responsibility – too little, too late – for his actions.

“And you think that taking on his hate for something you didn’t do is going to heal your wounds?” Betsy shook her head. “Logan, that’s not right to him, nor to you. You can’t go around lauding it all on your shoulders, and he deserves to hear the truth and decide accordingly.” She saw he was about to speak – how could he not take this upon his shoulders? He knew he’d fucked up – and cut him off. “I understand. Tonight you understood that that day you hurt him horribly, and so you want to atone. But you won’t be doing that by taking his ire for something else, something that wasn’t.”
He scoffed. “What should I do, Betsy? The boy doesn’t want to talk with me anymore, and he has a right to that.”

“You could stop referring to him as ‘boy’, for starters.” She raised an eyebrow. “Your son’s a man, Logan.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?” She sighed. “At least you don’t call him that to his face. But you need to stop thinking about him as the little kid you failed. He’s a grown man.”

“I know that.” he repeated, quietly.

“- and you can’t play this game where you decide what to answer for, even if to answer for.”

That wasn’t what he was doing. Was it? Logan looked away. He was taking responsibility for his actions. He was finally answering for what he’d done -

No. He was deciding everything, like always. She was right; he was doing everything by himself, and he wasn’t allowing Daken to have any say in it.

He turned towards her again. She was watching on, her head cocked to the side. “What should I do?” he asked again.

She sighed. “Talk, Logan. Explain. Apologize. Let him decide how to deal with this, with you. You’re right that you shouldn’t go looking for him right now. It’s too fresh. But you need to, Logan. For you, too.”

He averted his gaze. It seemed so obvious, when she said it like that, yet it was so monumentally difficult. Impossible. Daken would never want to talk, not after tonight. He was angry and, well… he had every right to be.

“Logan.” Betsy sighed again, heavily. He looked up; she was worrying her lower lip. “Do you know what we saw, tonight?”

Her wording alarmed him. “We? All three of you were keeping an eye on him?”

“Just me and Jean. Only her at first, but he was upset.” She grimaced.

Logan had upset Daken so much that Jean had needed backup to keep an eye on him.

“Logan,” Betsy said sharply. “Listen to me, for crying out loud. Do you know what we saw?”

He shook his head. Something terrible, no doubt. Daken’s features were distorted, deformed. He was terrified – and angry.

“We saw a man stuck in the past,” she said softly. “Unable to let go, to read what was happening. Stuck on a loop, ready to repeat past mistakes.”

Logan took a shaky breath. His poor son. Yes, they’d almost gone to blows, or worse. Logan would have gladly let Daken maul him, if that would suffice to quell his obvious pain.

“It hurt us, to see you like that,” Betsy said softly. He started, taken aback. Him? She was talking about Logan?

But wasn’t she right? He’d felt like he was walking on eggshells ever since he’d come back. He was,
quite literally, stuck in the past. He read situations with knowledge that was a few years old, he still struggled to read his children’s dynamics.

And, confronted with Daken’s rage, he was giving up again. Setting up their relationship for failure, acting like he had all the cards in his hand and it was his right only to deliver them.

“Logan.” She reached out, caught his hand. “He didn’t hit you.”

“What?” he looked up at her, confused. Daken had lashed out more than once. He hadn’t struck true, but Logan had thought that had to do with the telepaths.

“Oh, he wanted to. At first.” Betsy squeezed his hand. “But Logan, he didn’t. He took all that pain, all that rage, and decided to focus it elsewhere. He decided it wasn’t worth it.”

He’d decided that Logan wasn’t worth anything. Nothing wrong with that reasoning, in Logan’s opinion. But Betsy’s wording implied something else. “And you think that’s a good thing?” He grimaced.

“Absolutely.” Betsy cocked her head. “Would the man you knew, the son you left behind, have done that? Would he have stayed his hand, if angry with you?”

No. There wasn’t even the need to think about it: he knew the answer. He’d lived it, more than once. Every single one of their interactions had been a poker game, tinged with the threat of violence and, ultimately, leading up to it.

Logan shook his head.

“He’s grown, Logan,” Betsy said softly. “He’s trying so hard. You can believe me if I say that I was on high alert from the moment we retrieved him, ready to strike. But this isn’t the man we met that day.” The day Logan had killed him. Logan shuddered at recalling that moment, the wet sounds – his son’s struggling body. Betsy squeezed his hand again. “I think even he didn’t know who he was, that day. He’s building himself up, Logan, and you need to respect him enough to face him. Face the man he’s becoming. He might yet surprise you.”

It was true that their brief conversation – before Logan ruined everything – had tasted differently. Daken had seemed to be truly trying to engage; at some point he’d even seemed to imply he was welcoming Logan into the family he was building with his sisters.

Perhaps Betsy was right. Perhaps there was still time, perhaps not everything was lost. He should give his son the respect he deserved and talk to him without hiding behind what he thought was best. Reach a compromise.

Not immediately. Daken had told him to never talk to him again, and Logan couldn’t very well ignore that simple request – not so soon, with the pain of shock and betrayal still so raw. That would be disrespectful indeed.

But soon.

Betsy read his resolution on his face, or, perhaps, in his very mind. She smiled encouragingly, and patted his knee.

They stayed seated for a while, the dusk playing on their features. It was peaceful. He felt resolved, focused. He could still fix it – fix something at least. It wasn’t too late.

“I have to warn you,” she said then. “Things are going to get very hectic soon. For you. And I want
you to know that we’re going to be here, Logan. To help. If you feel overwhelmed.”

He was startled into a laughter, although it was a bit nervous. “That’s not ominous at all, Betsy.” He did appreciate the sentiment, it was just – that it was still so difficult, sometimes. He’d been alone for too long a part of his life, his time with the X-Men so short in comparison. But he was learning. God help him, he was.

“Nothing terrible, nor unsolvable.” Betsy hummed softly. “But the clan’s going to get larger, Logan.”

His heart skipped a beat. There was still an absence, these days, one he’d only known recently. “You mean -”

“Yes.” Betsy cocked her head. “They found Jimmy. He’s coming home.”

Chapter End Notes

Next: Daken sets himself up.

[Yep, Logan’s digging his own grave, nothing new here. In other news, water’s wet. Well, not really. He’s on the right path, I think, but it’s a long road. Not too long though, I promise. What do you think? Is he taking the wrong approach?]
Daken sets himself up.

Chapter Notes

No additional warnings this time. Recall the work tags, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

23.

The news came while they were prodding Daken.

He’d been right; it was a tedious, long affair. He’d thought McCoy had done all that could be done, but with Richards now in the picture, it seemed there wasn’t any limit to the number and type of procedures. Richards hadn’t needed to be this thorough the last time he’d treated Daken; but then he knew, more or less, what to look for, since Daken had told him.

Daken still recalled his words then, biting and sardonic, for Richards had told him he was dying and he had nothing to lose anymore; and then the bile rushing up his mouth as Johnny came into the room, the flutter in his chest, the sheer joy at seeing Johnny alive – and the terror, his walls coming up as he pushed Johnny away…

Johnny, hovering nearby now, after so many years had passed, drawn to Daken’s bedside like a moth. Daken had hoped time had taken care of that wretched hold, but it was almost as if mere moments had passed from his insults and Johnny was here, for him, for Daken, worried and one step away from fussing, when Daken had done nothing but using him all along, for all that time. Johnny was here, and Daken was breathing a little easier even though he knew this couldn’t do. He knew his shortcomings and he knew that Johnny didn’t deserve any of this, didn’t deserve to be ruined by Daken’s affections. But he was here, come in quiet support even after everything Daken had done, and it shouldn’t make Daken feel like this – flooded with such stark relief – but it did.

His thoughts drifted in this manner for the whole duration of the doctors’ checkup. He wasn’t truly paying attention to them, just let them move him and manhandle him, barely aware enough to follow their instructions. It was easier to do so, than to force himself to pay attention to his surroundings and thus meet Johnny’s eyes, exchange words with him. He was painfully, acutely aware of where Johnny stood, of the familiar cadence of his breathing, of his scent; but he couldn’t bring himself to face him.

Laura stood nearby, too. Bless her, she was staying for his sake, because she knew he was liable to make a fool of himself. He hated that she’d ignore her partner for him, but he couldn’t deny that her presence rooted him to the ground, helped him control himself. There were barbed, terrible things already on the tip of his tongue: it would be so easy to say them – to hurt Johnny, to drive him away, to protect him from Daken. But he couldn’t. He didn’t want to hurt Johnny. God help him, he’d never wanted to.

But he had to push Johnny away. He was damaged goods, wrecked by the newfound realization that he’d always be, despite his most recent foolish ideas; but he was proud to say that he’d grown enough to know that this time, he could let Johnny down gently. Johnny deserved nothing but
kindness. He’d suffered so much, at Daken’s hands too: Daken had exploited that weakness ruthlessly, slithering under the skin of the most impressionable member of the Fantastic Four with practiced ease. And oh, God, how he hated himself for it. Johnny was light, and warmth, and he hadn’t deserved the grief Daken had caused him.

He was wondering how best to address the matter when an obnoxious, cheerful ringtone came from the bundle of his clothes. He hadn’t bothered to change it after Jubilee had given him her phone; he’d never admit it, but it was a welcome diversion from the monotony of the med bay.

It could only be Lorna, updating him on the search for Jimmy. Daken tilted his head and spoke past the bodies that surrounded him. “Laura, could you read the message, please?”

His sister went to the stool where he’d left his clothes and took the pink monstrosity out of his right pocket. Daken ignored – to the best of his abilities – Johnny’s surprised intake and focused on Laura’s breathing as she skimmed the message.

She was good – oh, she’d had to become so, just as him – but the rhythm was just a little too off to be natural. Some news, then; not the usual nothing. Despite himself, some tendrils of alarm began to take a hold of him, and twin frantic beeps came out of the machine attached to him.

“Try to relax, please,” McCoy said softly. Daken brushed it off.

“Shut up, doctor. Laura? What is it?” Damn it, but his voice shook. He didn’t want to face the thought of Jimmy in the hands of those Soteira bastards; not even the thought that his brother was well protected by the aggressive alien slime was enough to dispel the worry. The Poison was a force of nature, but Soteira might have resources enough to take on him.

His brother shouldn’t go through what Daken had gone through – what Laura, Gabby, even Logan had gone through. Why was his family so cursed? Not so many years ago, he mused, he’d have pinned the paramilitary’s fascination of them on Logan; he was of a mind of doing so now, out of mere spite, but that was a child’s take on the issue. Logan had never been the problem: he was an idiot, but he was just that.

“She found Jimmy,” Laura murmured. She’d come closer to Daken and she’d managed to catch his hand, which, he realized, she must have been squeezing for quite some time now. He hadn’t noticed. “He’s safe. In Alberta.” Oh, the irony. “She’s going to get him. We’re -” Laura sighed. “According to her, the X-Men are assembling a team to meet up with her; she’s asking if you want to join.”

Pryde hadn’t bothered to notify him. Drake hadn’t deigned to come look for him. So much for cooperation and guilty conscience. Enraged, Daken made to sit up, but was held down by two pair of hands.

“No, none of that,” Richards chided, as if talking to a child. McCoy was more delicate, though just as irritating.

“I, ah, advise against rash behavior, Daken. You aren’t in top form, and we’re in the middle of -”

“I’m sure you have enough material by now,” Daken cut him off. “Your checkup will have to be put on hold.”

“I’d have thought you would have wanted your pheromones back,” Richards scoffed. The way he said it made Daken uneasy; he’d used them back then, of course. On the whole family, but most of all on Johnny. Subtly, for he knew Richards was a genius and could notice something, but he’d still used them.
He couldn’t apologize for that. It was what he did, what he always did; just another part of him, like his looks and his intelligence. He’d learnt to depend on them. And how could he not? It was either learning to use them or constantly second-guessing himself.

At the same time, he felt an urgent need to apologize. Not to Richards – but to Johnny, standing a few feet from him, still and silent and there for him as if Daken had never pulled his strings.

Or was that why he was here now? To confront Daken on their usage? Was he wondering if everything that happened between them had been a lie?

Would that the answer could be simple.

Would that he’d never had that power.

Again, that thought. Like when he was a child, like the past few days. Daken bit his tongue.

“My brother’s more important,” he said, subdued. It tasted like a truth. It was, in that moment.

“Is he.” Richard’s tone changed, became softer. Of course it would; Daken still recalled his own impassioned speech to the man, about the ridiculousness of the institution called family. What a childish fool he’d been then. “Even if we were finished, Daken, you’re in no shape to fight.”

Daken was about to spit venom at that, but Laura squeezed his hand. “Daken, it’s true.”

From her, he could accept that. It was, perhaps, true; he certainly felt still weak. He was… perhaps the word was ‘exhausted’. He wouldn’t help on the battlefield; perhaps he’d even make matters worse, be a liability.

He sighed. “Who’s on this team?”

Laura seemed to deflate with relief. “Iceman, Rachel, Rogue.”

Grey’s blood and a nigh-all-powerful titan. Then there was Drake, who, despite whatever else Daken knew and thought about him, at least had been able to hold his own against Daken, and so should manage to face Jimmy too; and there was Lorna, of course, who could easily control the adamantium laced to Jimmy’s bones. It seemed a good team, but there was a glaring absence.

“And Logan?” he forced himself to say. There was no denying that their father could be of use against Jimmy, if he was still possessed. Surely Logan knew that. Or perhaps he was running away from this new son, too?

Laura bit her lower lip. “It seems it was decided to keep him here. He doesn’t know.” There was a frown of disagreement on her forehead, but she quickly smoothed it. It seemed she was still angered with him on Daken’s behalf. But Jimmy shouldn’t pay for Logan’s mistakes. Old Logan was out of the games – still battling the adamantium poisoning.

“Laura.” Daken waited until she met his gaze. She knew what he was going to tell her and she was already shaking her head, bent on taking care of him. “You need to join the team.”

“I need to stay here,” she said, stubborn as ever. “With you. You need me here.”

“I need you with Jimmy,” he countered. “I’m in good hands, Laura. He doesn’t have anyone. He needs you.” He knew he was, perhaps, playing on the guilt she’d shown a few days back, when she’d realized that Jimmy’s situation had completely slipped her mind. He wasn’t doing it consciously, but there was nothing to it now: he’d done it, and he only hoped she wouldn’t hate him.
for it.

She started, a bit, and cocked her head, piercing him with her gaze. “You both need me,” she said evenly. Damn it; he hadn’t wanted to hurt her.

He squeezed her hand, hoping to convey how frightfully sorry he was. It seemed that all he’d done today was to casually hurt her with careless words, when she’d been so good to him. “I’m safe, though,” he said softly. “He isn’t. Not until he’s out there. Please go, Laura. Don’t leave him to Drake’s incompetence.” And his angry bouts. If Drake dared to punch his brother too, Daken would end him.

His own hypocrisy wasn’t lost on Daken. He’d tried to kill Jimmy, after all, on Magneto’s orders. He’d had to do so: he knew darkness, and he knew that Jimmy couldn’t be allowed to live if he couldn’t control it. He still thought that letting Jimmy go had been a mistake: teen Jean had been too soft.

The best thing to do, for anyone involved, was to bring Jimmy here. The telepaths would help him with the alien, and he’d be safe from Soteira.

Laura sighed. “Daken -”

“I’ll take care of Daken.”

It was Johnny’s voice. Johnny had finally spoken, shattering the wall Daken had so carefully built, and it took the breath out of him.

Johnny’s voice was soft, and warm, and kind. It was everything Daken yearned, and yet he knew he couldn’t have. But his head moved on its own, as if drawn by the sun, and their eyes finally met. They were the bluest blue, Johnny’s eyes; and there was a quiet resolution in them that made Daken weak in the knees. At least he was already laying down, thank God for small mercies. Thank God he could still wrench his gaze away, ignore Johnny, pretend he didn’t exist – and yet he couldn’t, his body still, his breath a stutter – his heartbeat hammering both in his ears and in those of everyone in the room, made manifest by the contraption that monitored it.

He felt naked and exposed to the scrutiny of both strangers and of those who mattered the most. He hated that.

But he could seize the opportunity to let Johnny down. Let him help Daken to his room and then, as they were alone, tell him -

Tell him what? That there hadn’t been a day that went by without thinking about him, that Daken had followed his life from afar, never daring to approach him again? That he’d stood by as Johnny mourned the loss of his powers first, and then that of his family? That eventually the thought of him had grown so stark, so painful, that Daken did his best not to ever linger on him... on their endless chats over the phone, on his scent, on Johnny’s apparent death that had seemed to carve a hole in his chest and sent him spiraling out of control in Los Angeles – the snake ensnared by its prey? Oh, his last words to Johnny, replaying themselves over and over again, every syllable wrong, every word a lash against himself too:

‘Real people stay dead when they die, Johnny.’

Real people –

A hand squeezing his. “Daken?” Concern in the voice. His sister’s.
He’d zoned out. They’d been talking around him, Laura’s other hand was on his leg, the doctors weren’t crowding him anymore, and Johnny – Johnny, closer to him than earlier, a hand raised, was eyeing him worriedly. Stupid boy. How could he still look at Daken like that?

“Yes?” Daken forced himself to focus. He studiously ignored the clear pity in McCoy’ gaze, the shrewd interest in Richards’. He resolutely did not look at Johnny again.

Laura bit her lower lip. “Is that okay with you?” ‘Are you comfortable with this, with him?’ her eyes were asking, but she wouldn’t say that in front of Johnny. The worry – and guilt – for Jimmy were winning out, helped by her heroic nature and Daken’s nudge. But she was still worried about Daken, too.

“Yes,” he reassured her. “I’m sure Johnny -” his voice came out strangled. He hoped no one had noticed, but that was a vain hope. “I’ll be fine, Laura. Go.”

With a last, tortured glance at him and a protective glare that could have burned holes into Johnny’s head, she went.

“Well,” McCoy coughed delicately. “Do you feel up to continue -”

“Yes,” Daken said quickly. Anything, to stop thinking about Johnny, to avoid stealing glances at him now that his self-control had shattered. Anything.

The thought that he’d soon spend time alone with Johnny was, suddenly, torture. He found himself hoping that Laura came back before they finished, Jimmy in tow; and the next moment he desperately hoped for the opposite, craving being tended to by Johnny – aching for the warmth and closeness. Then he’d berate himself, knowing there was nothing he could do but firmly rejecting whatever Johnny had come to say, for the man’s sake.

It was too soon that both doctors stepped away from him and announced they were done, even though he knew hours must have passed; and Daken lay still, not knowing what to do, what to say. Laura wasn’t back yet and his fate was sealing itself, but Johnny, ever so tactful, stood a little to the side, unwilling to impose. It was McCoy who helped Daken sit, his furry hands firm against Daken’s chest and shoulder. Richards didn’t deign him of a further glance and moved to bend on the bounty they’d collected.

“How do you feel, Daken?” McCoy asked gently. The man just couldn’t be rough, could he?

“Like a train ran me over,” Daken quipped. It was just as well that none of them knew he had an actual frame of reference for that figure of speech.

McCoy nodded sagely. “Well, that’s to be expected. You’ll want to rest, now.”

It seemed he couldn’t escape. “Yes, you’d mentioned that.” Feeling his gaze move towards Johnny again, Daken hastily directed it to Richards, hard at work over the data. “How soon might I expect your results?”

“Oh, it’s difficult to say.”

“Sooner than you think,” Richards spoke over McCoy’s cautious words. He didn’t turn as he spoke. “I have a hunch already, but I need to confirm it.”

“You’ll be notified, of course.” McCoy moved to stand between them, his hands held up in a placating manner. “But the only thing you need to focus on right now is to get better. I’ll give you a tonic regimen, wait a second -” He disappeared between two shelves. With no other company but
Richards’ mutterings as he confronted Daken’s data, Daken was left with no choice but to face Johnny again.

Johnny stood to the side, worry in his eyes. When he met Daken’s gaze he attempted a smile, though tinged with uncertainty: now that Laura was gone, his brave mask had slipped, and he was forced to confront the fact he’d volunteered to babysit the man who’d hurt him so much. And still he stood tall and proud, ready to take on the task.

He was beautiful. Breathtaking; he’d always been so. Always so maddeningly kind, clueless to the point of frustration and yet so attentive where it counted.

And, most importantly, Daken reminded himself as McCoy returned with a blister pack and a wheelchair, Johnny was – must be – unattainable.

That was how it should be. And that was how it would be.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Daken and Johnny reminisce the past.

[Don’t be like that, Daken.
Fun fact! When the Heat issues came out, I was just following the X-Men side of Marvel. Imagine my surprise, delight, general angst when I realized that Johnny was supposed to be dead at the time. Up until then, I’d simply thought that the Heat hallucinations showed Johnny because he was, you know, The One. But he was dead! Well, presumed dead. Delicious. I’d have loved a longer confrontation about it, but alas, the writer must have realized that would have sent Daken/Johnny shippers in a frenzy. Or perhaps editorial vetoed it. Well. That’s what fanfiction’s for, right? ;)
I rambled enough, forgive me. I just have many feelings about these two. What about you all? What did you think about this chapter? I love to hear your thoughts ^-^]
Johnny was quiet.

The trip to the med bay was eerily quiet. Johnny still hadn’t said a word; not in McCoy’s lab, as he watched McCoy help Daken dress, and not as he was tasked by the two scientists to help Daken sit on the wheelchair, his arms strong and far too welcome around Daken’s waist. His breath had stuttered then, just as Daken’s, but he hadn’t said anything.

The only one doing the talking was Daken, guiding him through the corridors with terse directions. Daken was acutely aware of Johnny’s presence behind him: his warmth, his breathing, his heartbeat. He found himself furiously wishing it had been his hypersenses to vanish instead of the pheromones, so that he couldn’t smell so starkly the man’s unique scent – embers and, inexplicably, lilies. Even his perspiration was one of a kind, clean and fresh as if purified by his ardent pores. Daken could certainly do without hearing Johnny’s breathing, that he seemed to be desperately trying to keep under control, and Johnny’s heartbeat, like soft drums pounding behind Daken. His hands rested at mere inches from Daken’s dirty hair and Daken was mortified at the thought of Johnny accidentally brushing it and feeling the coarse texture. He needed to wash it, but personal hygiene had been the last thing on his mind today.

It mirrored well how he felt, though. Dirty, and unworthy.

They reached the med bay. Johnny wheeled him wordlessly to his secure section – they still hadn’t removed glass and adamantium, though the door wasn’t ever locked – and stopped the wheelchair by the bed.

There was a beat of silence, then Johnny finally spoke. “You want to lay down?” There was just a quiver in his voice: he was controlling himself admirably. Daken nodded, then hoisted himself up on the armrests in a vain attempt to do it on his own.

He failed miserably, his legs shaking with the exertion and then betraying him; and he fell hard against the seat. He hated this. He hated to show such weakness in front of Johnny, when he should be strong and sure of himself, so that his rejection would ring true.

Johnny cried out in dismay and was in front of him in a second, his hands hovering by Daken’s shoulders. “Careful!” he said, so softly, and his fingers fluttered inches from Daken. “Can I touch you?”

Daken couldn’t help it: he shut his eyes. So many times he’d been touched without permission – and that cursed train of thought must be derailed, for he refused to soil Johnny by thinking about
Romulus in his presence.

Even back then, Johnny had been this mindful. Such a question had been prompted by Johnny’s inexperience, by startled reverence. But still, he’d asked it before grabbing Daken’s biceps, before Daken soiled that innocence with a kiss that tasted of ashes. Daken felt ill at the thought, recalling Johnny’s quiet, surprised moans as Daken sank to his knees on the hard concrete of the Baxter Building’s rooftop and took Johnny into his mouth. It had been a way to cement their bond before leaving; something strong enough to overcome whatever Richards was sure to tell his brother-in-law when he finally realized that Daken had stolen from them. And it had worked: for as long as they were on speaking terms, Johnny had never mentioned anything, even when news of Daken’s exploits in Madripoor had spread. Then Johnny had died – had seemed to die.

For some time after Johnny’s “death”, the only thing keeping Daken together had been the memory of Johnny’s arms around him. Not Johnny’s sloppy kisses, nor his uncoordinated attempt at a handjob once Daken was back on his feet, stopped short by Daken “playfully” swatting his hand away – but Johnny’s embrace. Johnny had gathered him into his arms, had held him close, and for a moment, a moment, Daken had felt at home. He’d felt as if he’d found the peace he’d just told Johnny he was seeking out. As Johnny held him, his turmoil had simmered down to a dull, bearable ache.

He’d known then that he was doomed, that his game was getting out of control, that the roles were reversing. But that small moment between them had both tortured him and comforted him when Johnny had “died.”

Then had come the drugs, that at the end had even tormented him with visions of Johnny, and then he was dying, and then he’d seen Johnny again, but he was real this time. Alive. And he’d lashed out, like the stupid child he’d been at the time.


Daken opened his eyes and lost himself in the depths of Johnny’s. How he longed for Johnny’s embrace –

He averted his gaze. “You can.”

Wordlessly – how fragile was the equilibrium of this interaction, and how Johnny must sense it, so light was he on his feet! - Johnny hooked his arms around Daken’s armpits and pulled him up. It was close enough to what Daken had been craving that he felt himself relax into it, and the next moment he stiffened, angered with himself. That made Johnny’s maneuvers much more difficult, but Johnny didn’t protest as he half-dragged Daken towards the bed and helped him under the sheets.

Afterwards he hovered at Daken’s bedside, looking down at him with that worry that made Daken’s stomach clench. He was wringing his hands, too, and his eyes darted over every inch of Daken’s covered body.

“You all right?” he said softly.

Oh, it was unbearable. “Yes,” Daken said, looking away. It was easier, maybe. Would make it easier. Not that he did know what to do. Oh, he knew what he should do – but he felt, suddenly, that he had no strength for it.

“How, how could Johnny act like this when Daken had hurt him, had laid waste to his home? When there were no pheromones to push, to subtly nudge him towards Daken?
Daken shook his head, fearing he couldn’t be able to speak, and tried to ignore Johnny’s quiet sound of disappointment. Such a fruitless endeavor; Johnny had a way of reining him back, of making him question everything – even himself.

“I’ll go, then,” Johnny said, his voice small. “Take care -”

“Please stay.” It was out of Daken’s mouth before he could even realize the desperate plea was forming in his mind, let alone on his tongue. It startled him with the sheer force of its longing, and Johnny’s breath hitched too.

“All right,” he said softly, and after a moment of hesitation he grabbed a plastic chair, pulled it closer, and sat down.

Silence fell, again. It was ridiculous, dangerous, unfair to Johnny; Daken must put a stop to this. He must send Johnny away, never to look back, and yet – and yet. How he ached! How strongly he’d craved Johnny’s presence, his forgiveness, even knowing he didn’t deserve it!

“When I heard you needed help,” Johnny began, quietly, reeling Daken in. “When McCoy contacted Reed – I had to come here. I had to see you.” A sigh. “I was worried.”

What, Daken thought, shutting his eyes, have I done to you? The words so strongly reminded him of another moment Johnny had bared himself, when Daken had faked his death and then shown up with no regard for Johnny’s sanity, in a ploy to pull Johnny tighter against himself. ‘When I thought you were dead,’ Johnny had said, so quietly, so relieved, “I was sorry. More sorry than you know. I felt terrible that I wasn’t there for you.’ That reaction had been exactly what Daken had counted on, and yet it had left an acidic taste in his mouth. His whole damn foray into Johnny’s home that night had left him with bile rushing up his throat, the blowjob on the rooftop the final nail in the coffin. Johnny’s embrace had startled him, had moved him in ways he hadn’t allowed himself for so long. He’d thought that he was being sloppy, that he was letting sentiment ruin his plans. He’d recoiled. Speaking over the phone had been an easier way to cultivate the relationship without getting too attached, but he’d constantly felt himself slipping, and slipping, and slipping –

And afterwards, he’d hurt Johnny terribly. With his words, with his actions. And there was no Death Seed as an excuse at the time – just the fact that he’d been a real monster back then.

“What you’re feeling,” he forced himself to say, “is a residue of my manipulations, Johnny. I made you like me back then. With words, and actions, and my pheromones -”

“No,” Johnny said simply.

Daken looked back at him; Johnny was gazing at him serenely, with a quiet resolution. It hit Daken, in that moment, that Johnny had grown too. Years had passed, and he’d faced many hardships. He was more mature than the soft boy Daken had lured into his schemes. There was a certain air around him – he was older. Wiser.

Still so young, though. Still so trusting, so soft. So unaware of the open side he was offering, of the many ways Daken could debase him if he were still the man he’d used to be.

“Yes,” Daken said, stupidly. Johnny had to see. “I wormed my way in, Johnny. I exploited you -”

“You know,” Johnny interrupted him, his voice light. “I’ve had ample time to think about all of this. Yes, you used me to get at us.” He cocked his head, as if such a thing was unimportant. “You charmed me. And I let myself be charmed. I let myself be wooed, because you were – you are – amazing, and the idea that a man of your sophistication could be interested in me,” he cradled his
hands in his lap, a small smile on his face. “I liked that.”

That had been the whole point. At the time, Johnny truly was nothing more than the baby of the group, always treated like a silly boy despite being an adult. He was spoiled, but so utterly alone it hadn’t even been funny; the pit in Daken’s stomach had formed fairly early. It was returning now.

“You didn’t ‘let me’, Johnny. You had no choice –”

“Oh, come off it,” Johnny snapped, finally showing something other than worry and understanding. “Reed was on it immediately, of course. Fussed over me for days. Studied what you’d left us, all your data, your powers. Your pheromones, Daken.”

Daken swallowed; finally a reaction he could get behind. “Yes. I used them on you.” Not like that, he bit down, Never like that. He’d rather die – but Johnny didn’t need to know that. “What you’re feeling for me, Johnny, is purely artificial.”

“I said come off it. I swear, it’s like you want to make this difficult.” Johnny ran his fingers through his hair. “Reed concluded that they’re close-ranged, your pheromones. That they could probably create an addiction, but only if you use them on someone all day long, for weeks. We didn’t spend that much time together, Daken,” he said, softly. “What I feel is genuine, thank you very much.”

What he felt. Whatever wretched thing he felt, it was Daken’s fault. He had to put a stop to this conversation. “I groomed you, Johnny.” Like he’d been doing to poor Zach. Like it had been done to him –

God, oh, God. What a monster he’d been, he’d turned into Romulus, and Romulus was alive, alive –

“Easy,” Johnny was saying, gently, a hand on Daken’s arm. He was sitting on Daken’s bed, a crease of worry on his forehead. He was caressing Daken, shushing him softly, and his touch was the most comforting thing Daken had ever felt. He leant into it, desperate, panted for air. His face was wet. He shouldn’t do this, he shouldn’t cave, and yet, and yet –

And yet.

Johnny’s touch was light, his fingertips merely ghosting the sheets, but Daken felt their warmth all the same. “I’m sorry I forced this conversation on you. You’re tired, and I upset you. I didn’t mean to.”

Daken let out a shaky laughter. The world had gone mad, that Johnny would apologize to him when Daken was the one in the wrong. “I hurt you, Johnny.”

Johnny hummed. “And I made my peace with it.” His hand was so warm. “You shouldn’t use that word so lightly. It’s a horrible thing, grooming. And you didn’t do that. No one who’d get so ill at the mere idea could be capable of that.”

Oh, but he had been. He had. He’d been trained to exploit any weaknesses, to manipulate his way through everything, by any means necessary. “I used you.” Why didn’t Johnny get it? Was he so desperate to be hurt again?

“A long time ago,” Johnny said gently. “And you’ve changed since then. Haven’t you?”

Daken looked up, at Johnny’s open, soft features. It could be so easy to say ‘no’. To laugh in Johnny’s face. To send him away, sobbing from a few sharp words.

Not easy, no. Not easy at all. “What do you want from me?” he asked instead, defeated. “Why are
“For you,” Johnny murmured. “I’m here for you. I want to help you, to be there for you. I miss our conversations… I miss us. I miss what we were.”

What we were. Oh, Johnny. They’d never been anything but a fool’s dream.

“We were a lie, Johnny. Don’t you remember the last thing I told you?” God, it was burnt in Daken’s memory. ‘That was me. You’d expired your usefulness, Johnny, and I didn’t care.’

Johnny’s hand stopped, his breath caught in his throat. Good. Now he’d leave. Now he’d see, and go away, safe, far away from Daken –

Johnny resumed his comforting caress. “You don’t remember.” It was a whisper, with a touch of wonder, and reverence. “That was always a possibility, of course, you didn’t sound like yourself, but I’d hoped -” He shook his head. “I know you cared, even then. Why are you so bent on pushing me away?”

Because it was safer for him. Because Daken didn’t want to slip, and harm him again with careless words. Because Johnny was precious, and didn’t deserve the hurt that came from associating with Daken.

But what did Johnny mean by saying that Daken “hadn’t sounded like himself”? When?

Johnny sighed. “Daken, I… I don’t want to impose. Say the word, and I’ll leave. But know I’m here for you. You can call me anytime, I can come visit. If you want me to.” He shifted, his hand stilled – waiting for Daken’s answer.

That was his cue. That was his opening, his opportunity to close the door to Johnny’s face forever. It would only be right.

“What don’t I remember?” Daken found himself asking quietly.

Johnny shifted, again. He seemed, suddenly, unsure, embarrassed. “You… you called me, Daken.” He cleared his throat, and Daken could see droplets of tears gathering on his long eyelashes. He attempted to sit, alarmed, but Johnny patted his arm. “No, no, I’m fine. Stay down, you need to rest.” He rubbed at his eyes with his palm.

Daken kept his position, awkwardly half sat, dizzy and strained; he ached to reach out, to comfort Johnny over the pain he’d caused. But that was the point, wasn’t it? What right did he have?

He’d called Johnny? Of course he had, they used to talk over the phone extensively –

“After you blew up,” Johnny began, his breath hitching and then resuming normally, “Was that a ruse too, by the way? Like with Mystique?”

Like when he’d faked his death at Hellverine’s hands, he meant. No, Daken’s death in front of Earth’s mightiest heroes had been very real. He’d come back to life in a sewer, though, and he’d hated every second of it. He’d sought death often, back then. He’d found himself in Creed’s hands shortly after, and he’d played along, courting his own murder by his father’s hands – engineering it, really. What a fool. What a fool. “No, I really died,” he muttered, hoping Johnny wouldn’t hear the absolute self-loathing in his voice. ‘Real people stay dead when they die, Johnny.’

“Right.” Johnny squeezed his arm. “Reed had been working on my phone. It was with me, in the Negative Zone, and it had been fried. I wanted to recover some things, so I asked him if he could fix
it. He put that on hold, for a while, but some time after you… after you died, he got everything back to me.” He took a deep breath. Daken had an inkling of where this might be going, and dread and anticipation were pooling in his stomach. He hadn’t – he hadn’t, had he?

Of course he had. He’d been a right mess at the time. And the Heat drug, the blackouts –

“There were a lot of voicemails,” Johnny whispered. “You seemed, uh, intoxicated, you were slurring – you were high, weren’t you? That drug that Reed said was killing you?”

Daken could barely remind himself to breathe. He dreaded to think what he could have slurred, calling Johnny’s phone while Johnny was presumed dead. He’d been wrecked by the news, he’d thrown himself into the L.A. party scene – put himself right in damn Roston’s hands. He’d lost count of the times he’d come to in the bathtub, in a pool of his own blood – and now it seemed that, in addition to resorting to self-harm, he’d also called a dead man. More than once.

“Yes,” he choked out. “I was high.”

“Right.” Johnny got quiet, his fingers running circles over Daken’s arm. “You seemed in a lot of pain,” he murmured.

Oh, God. Johnny felt responsible. That was why he was doing this – God knew what the hell Daken had said, in those voicemails. Whatever it was, Daken had been dead when Johnny had finally heard them, and Johnny must have replayed them over and over again, overcome by guilt. And now he’d come to… to do what? To apologize? Him, apologize to Daken? That wasn’t right.

“I’d made my bed, Johnny. It was only right I lay in it.”

“Don’t say that,” Johnny countered immediately, a pang of pain in his voice. “Don’t, okay? Whatever you did – you didn’t deserve all that pain. You don’t deserve that. Nobody does.”

Oh, Johnny. Still so maddeningly kind. So ready to see past any and all faults.

There were things Daken had never deserved. God, at least he knew that now. Things no child could ever deserve. But he also knew when he was in the wrong, when he hurt people. And what had happened to him in L.A. - he’d reaped what he’d sown.

He had to impress upon Johnny how terribly wrong this was, how he wasn’t worthy of Johnny’s worry and affection; he wasn’t worthy of being cried over – not by Johnny, whom he’d hurt so much. But Johnny was so close and so warm and kind and soft and Daken’s tongue was lead in his mouth, and he wanted, oh, he wanted –

“Daken!”

They were both startled by the young cry resounding in the room. He’d been so focused on Johnny, that he hadn’t noticed the scents approaching. He managed to wrench his gaze away from Johnny’s blue eyes and saw Gabby standing in the doorway, worry on her little face. Beside her stood another Daken had wronged.

Zach held himself morosely, his hands thrust in his pockets, and he was leaning against the doorjamb. His brow was knitted with worry, too, but there was a touch of something like irritation in his eyes.

“Gabby, right?” Johnny said genially, turning to face her. She let go of her tortured expression for a moment, and her eyes brightened with excitement.
“You know who I am?”

“Of course! The great and infamous Honey Badger.” Johnny was really good with kids – Daken had noticed that at the time, with his nephew and niece. He’d never cared for that piece of information, but as he watched Johnny smile at Gabby something melted in his chest. “It’s an honor.”

“Oh!” Gabby squeaked, her cheeks tinging with red. “Me too, I mean, likewise. You’re like, a – I’m sorry, do you know each other?” she derailed what she’d been saying, curious.

“We’re friends,” Johnny said matter-of-factly, squashing any attempt to describe more aptly the situation. His hand was warm on Daken’s arm, though, and Daken found he couldn’t correct him.

Zach harrumphed.

“And you? I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name -?” Johnny turned his attention to Zach – still with that attentive, beautiful smile.

Zach crunched up his nose. “Me? I’m no one.” He turned on his heels, and marched out of the room.

“Zach? Hey, Zach!” Gabby went after him. Daken listened to the sounds – to Zach’s angry whispers, though he didn’t dare lay a finger on Gabby, and even if he did, he’d find that she bit.

Zach seemed annoyed. This was his first time visiting, and Daken, too, hadn’t dared approach him past his useless apology in this very room from a few days ago. What good were words? What could they possibly accomplish, given what he’d done?

No, it was better that Zach was angry. That he stayed away from Daken.

Why did that hurt so much?

“You all right?” Johnny murmured, squeezing his arm. Daken breathed out the shaky sigh he’d apparently been holding.

“Yes.”

Johnny gave him a look, as if he was able to call Daken out on his bullshit now, and he opened his mouth, but they were interrupted, again, by Gabby coming into the room.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with him!” she huffed, marching to Daken and brushing her small fingers against Daken’s sheets. “He saw I was coming here and he sneaked in with me, Shadowcat was distracted – You all right, Daken? You look worse than this morning!” she said with dismay, the corners of her lips bending down.

“I’m fine, Gabby. McCoy just roughened me up a bit, that’s all.” Daken winked at her.

She gave him the same look Johnny had given him. “Yes, Laura said. She told me, but I hadn’t expected – well.” She shook her head. “This will cheer you up!” she said with dismay, the corners of her lips bending down.

“I’m fine, Gabby. McCoy just roughened me up a bit, that’s all.” Daken winked at her.

She gave him the same look Johnny had given him. “Yes, Laura said. She told me, but I hadn’t expected – well.” She shook her head. “This will cheer you up!” she jumped on the spot a bit.

He was truly blessed, to have a little sister so obviously excited at the thought of cheering him up. God, he’d really let himself go today, hadn’t he? He suppressed his grimace and looked up at her with an encouraging smile. “Yes?”

It was good, that he was laying down already, and that Johnny was firmly holding his arm. The stark relief that flooded him at hearing her news took him by surprise.

“It’s Jimmy!” she fired off, bright and elated, “He’s back!”
Next: Jimmy arrives at the mansion.

[These two will be the death of me. This story isn’t turning into a shipfest, I promise. Johnny is going to take a back seat for a while now, although he will show up again. Let me know what you think! Your comments make my day ^-^]
It wasn’t difficult to convince Jimmy to follow them.

Laura had thought there would be a fight – and her fellow X-Men were of the same persuasion, or Pryde wouldn’t have sent a team – but Jimmy was remarkably calm, in relative control of the Poison… exactly as the smaller Jean had said. Of course, according to Rachel, the Poison still lurked in the back of Jimmy’s mind, ready to take over its host, and the telepath thought that they ought to rid Jimmy of it; but for now, Jimmy wasn’t a danger to others or himself.

And he was bored. He’d been living in the wilderness for a while now, and he was ready to come back to civilization. He was, too, sensible enough to see that Soteira could represent a problem for him, and that he shouldn’t be alone and risk being captured and giving the monsters another weapon.

He’d followed them into the Blackbird without expressing any doubts. There had been no need, no need at all, to go in so overpowered. Certainly, Laura could have stayed at the school. With Daken.

She’d left him instead, and she was worried about what she could find when she came back. Oh, he’d told her to go, he’d practically begged her with his gaze – wanting to stay alone with Johnny Storm, to have the conversation he’d apparently postponed for years. In any other moment, she’d have commended his willingness to right a wrong, but today wasn’t the day. Today he was shell-shocked and strained, and she feared he’d be too hard on himself.

It was a relief when they finally touched town at the school. She was on her feet immediately, ready to get out and reach Daken, hoping to find him still in Hank’s lab.

Not a good idea, Laura, Jean’s voice echoed in her mind. He’s having a delicate conversation.

With Storm? Laura paused – in the middle of the jet, she realized, and moved to sit back, ignoring her teammates’ and Jimmy’s curious glances. Is he all right?

He’s doing what he needs to do. There was certainty in Jean’s voice. Don’t worry yourself sick, Laura. He’ll be fine. Think of yourself, too.

I don’t think you realize what you’re asking of me. Laura kept seated as the cargo door opened and Iceman and Rogue led Jimmy down, the young man throwing her another glance. They still hadn’t exchanged a word, as Laura had been too focused on what could await her on their return.

They hadn't spoken in really long, she realized. Even too long, perhaps; other things had occupied
her mind, but he was still part of her family.

Oh, I do realize, Jean sighed. Biting the inside of her cheek, Laura met Rachel’s curious, compassionate gaze: the woman knew that her mother was conversing with Laura.

There was a nervous energy around Rachel: Jean and Braddock had convened that she shouldn’t get into Daken’s mind, but she seemed to be frustrated with that decision. Given what Laura knew and had surmised of Rachel’s past, she agreed with the other two telepaths.

You think Daken’s your responsibility, Jean said softly, interrupting Laura’s thoughts. You did wonders for him, but he isn’t, Laura. Keep that in mind. As if she could dispel her worry that easily! I’m not asking you to, Jean reassured her, merely pointing out you’re your own person, Laura. He doesn’t want you to annihilate yourself for him, I assure you.

I’m not annihilating myself.

Jean didn’t answer. With a sigh, Laura got up and moved for the cargo door, surveying the hangar.

Pryde had come to welcome Jimmy, and she was talking to him in that newfound brisk manner of hers. Jimmy held himself strangely before her: tightly coiled, a raw longing in his eyes. Pryde seemed to be ignoring it for now, in favor of explaining to him the situation and what was expected of him, what would happen to him if the Poison took over. Rachel cursed under her breath and moved past Laura to join her partner and reassure Jimmy.

That left Laura alone with Polaris. The woman had decided to come with, both to check on her former teammate and to offer her help. Laura couldn’t say she knew her that well – they’d mostly worked together in dire circumstances, with no time for idle chat – but she knew that Magneto’s daughter was viciously loyal.

“That old curmudgeon decided to sit this one out?” Polaris said lightly, coming to stand beside Laura at the door. Despite the situation, Laura was almost startled into a laughter; that wasn’t a phrase she’d ever heard used to describe Daken. It fit, though. Just a bit. “Given how much he was harassing me, I thought I’d have seen him on the rescue team.”

Her mood sobered, Laura turned to face the woman. “Beast was doing a check-up. He was in no condition to fight.”

Polaris cocked her head, sensing that Laura wasn’t telling her everything. “Would he have been in the condition to fight, if Hank hadn’t been doing a check-up?”

Perceptive. Or perhaps something of Daken’s current inner turmoil had bled into his messages.

Laura hesitated. Was Polaris a friend of Daken’s? Could Laura relay his state to the woman? He’d said he found her company “adequate”, but he hadn’t quite elaborated past that. Still, the fact that he’d gone to her for help spoke volumes to Laura.

“Oh, don’t panic. You’re a good sister.” Polaris smiled, all teeth, and winked. Laura could see why Daken might like her. “I’ll see for myself when I visit him. I can visit him, right?” She arched an eyebrow.

Definitely cut from the same cloth as Daken.

“I don’t see why you couldn’t.” Laura nodded at her. “I think he’ll be glad to see you.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll hide it.” Polaris grinned.
Not in the state he’s in now, no. Laura sighed. On the one hand, it was good that he wasn’t being able to – so that she could more easily see how he was faring. On the other, she knew how he hated to wear his heart on his sleeve around strangers. Perhaps she ought to check with Daken, before springing Polaris on him. That is, if she managed to see him before Polaris decided to go. Surely Jean would warn her once Storm was gone?

Maybe she wouldn’t. After all, Jean had told her not to worry, and to think about herself. There was some merit to the suggestion – God knew how Laura ached to see Jubilee, and she should apologize for leaving her without waking her up – but she couldn’t rest easily until she saw how Daken fared after this ‘delicate’ conversation with Storm…

All such thoughts ground to a halt at the sight of who was coming into the hangar: Logan was flanked by his partners, and he had a deer-in-headlights look as he cautiously approached Jimmy. As was right, given the delicate situation.

Would that he could be just as careful when he interacted with Daken! Laura clenched her teeth. She stood there, fuming, as Logan finally reached his son from another universe and greeted him awkwardly. Jimmy cocked his head, nodded, shook Logan’s hand.

Beside her, Polaris hummed. “What did Logan do?”

Laura turned towards her. “What?”

Polaris cocked an eyebrow. “You’re visibly seething. What did he do? I assume it was terrible, you don’t strike me as the type to hold an unwarranted grudge.”

Laura worried her lower lip. Polaris was Daken’s friend; she should at least be made aware of something, to better face him. “He hid something from Daken,” she said slowly. Sound carried more easily in the hangar, but Logan seemed to be entirely focused on this new child, and even if he did hear, who cared? At least he’d know where Laura stood on the matter. “Something quite important. I… suppose he did it because he thought it would protect Daken,” or that was what she hoped, anyway, “But it was something he had no right to lie about.”

Polaris crossed her arms. “And you’re angry on Daken’s behalf.” She leaned against the cargo door. “How did he take it?” She pursed her lips.

“It was a breach of trust.” She wouldn’t get into it, it wasn’t right. But she could explain what could be explained. “And he discovered it just as they were trying to mend things. He’s… hurt, mostly.”

Polaris nodded. “Can I give you some advice? One half-sibling to another?”

Laura bit the inside or her cheek. She didn’t like such categorization, but she got Polaris’ meaning. The woman was trying to help; and she had the experience for it. “Please.”

Polaris’ gaze turned towards the scene before them. Laura followed her glance: Logan was talking in fits and starts, attempting to connect with Jimmy, but her brother didn’t seem overtly interested. He was listening, though. The others had moved a bit to the side, giving the duo privacy.

“If Logan’s repentant,” Polaris said, and Laura returned her attention to her, “you should try and mediate. Nothing good comes from this kind of rift. Miscommunication abounds until all Hell comes loose – when it could have taken so little to make up.” She half-shrugged, a grimace on her face. “Next you know, people are at your sibling’s throat and your father’s a mess of guilt and self-hatred.”

It wasn’t quite Daken’s situation, but Polaris’ meaning was clear: she knew how it felt to get stuck in
the middle of a family feud, to see her siblings self-destruct. Laura had no intention of letting things go so badly. “It won’t come to that,” she said firmly.

Polaris returned her attention to Laura and seemed to study her. Perhaps this was what they’d bonded over, Daken and her: a difficult relationship with their fathers, perceived abandonment, the huge shadows they projected on their children. Laura herself still struggled with the latter.

Whatever Polaris saw on her face, it apparently satisfied her. “No, you won’t let it,” she murmured. “Well!” she said suddenly, linking their arms together. “Let’s go and say hi, what do you think?” She led her down and Laura let her, too startled to resist.

Logan watched them approach, some alarm in his eyes. Maybe he’d heard something, because he regarded Laura like he wanted to apologize and yet didn’t dare to. Since it wasn’t her he should apologize to, Laura found herself even more irritated.

But she couldn’t say anything in front of Jimmy. He was eyeing them both curiously, sensing the tension simmering beneath, maybe pondering if he should ask.

Yet, his gaze shifted towards Polaris; he’d decided to play it safe. “Are you staying, then?” he asked his former teammate.

“If they’ll have me!” The woman cocked her head to smile at Pryde. “What do you say, Kitty? Are you in need of a metal manipulator?”


“Oh, you know him,” Polaris shrugged. “He needs his solitude every now and then.”

“Did you condone his plan to kill me?” Jimmy asked quietly. Polaris was startled, but there didn’t seem to be any malice in the question – just quiet interest.

“… I didn’t know he’d sent Daken,” she answered truthfully. Logan’s heart skipped a beat, but he didn’t say anything. For now, at least. “I was there when Jean confronted him – I gave him a piece of my mind. Gave it to Daken, too. I’m sure there was some other way – I’m sorry I didn’t realize sooner.”

“Don’t be,” Jimmy waved a hand. “Your father, and Daken – they knew that sometimes the hardest decision’s the right one. It was the only sensible solution. I was a danger, in that moment.”

Pryde inhaled to speak – to ask if he still was, perhaps – but Logan beat her to it. “Daken tried to kill you?” he choked out. Laura clenched her jaw. Hadn’t he been listening?

“To kill the Poison, yes.” Jimmy tapped at his chin while he returned his attention to Logan, pensive. “Like I said, the only sensible solution. If Jean hadn’t succeeded, they would have had to terminate me, and none of the little ones had the mental fortitude to do it.” Little ones. It was strange, to hear the Original Five called like that.

“Little Jean helped him take over the Poison,” Rachel explained. Jimmy cocked his head.

“But I would have liked to see you tear Daken a new one, Lorna.” His lips quirked upwards. “He’s just so full of himself sometimes, isn’t he?” Although there was warmth in his voice and mirth in his eyes, and Laura knew very well that he was saying nothing but the truth... she pictured Daken as she’d seen him lately – that morning, a few days ago, after the Death Seed was gone. And she couldn’t bear the light teasing.
“He’s the one who insisted to find you,” she spoke up, her voice like gravel. “He was worried.” Daken had thought about Jimmy when even Laura had forgot, and that had to count for something.

Jimmy crunched up his nose. “Was he?” He regarded her with interest, probably inferring there was something she wasn’t saying… sensing her inner turmoil. “I’ll have to thank him.”

“You do that,” she said briskly.

Jimmy cocked his head. “Is he here? At the school?”

“Yes. He’s resting now.” Jimmy arched an eyebrow at that. “I suppose you’ll be able to see him soon.”

Logan shifted. “How is -?”

“Shut up, Logan,” she cut him off with a snarl… taking herself by surprise.

Not just herself. A hush fell upon the hangar; Iceman, Rogue, Kurt, and Ororo, who’d been quietly conversing a little afar from the group, looked in their direction with some alarm. Rachel and Pryde stood stunned – Laura felt something probing at the edge of her mind, a soothing presence, but there was nothing Rachel could do to calm her down, not after what she’d witnessed that morning. And it had been Logan’s fault.

Logan was ashen. Jimmy was eyeing them both, obviously intrigued, and Polaris discreetly nudged Laura. The woman’s advice came to Laura’s mind; Laura intended to follow it – Logan did seem repentant – but now was too soon. She bristled at the mere sight of her father, at how quickly he’d turned to Jimmy…

But that was uncharitable of her. Of course Logan had been worried about Jimmy, too.

She took a deep breath. “Daken’s resting, Logan,” she said quietly. “He obviously isn’t fine, but you couldn’t have expected anything else, considering what you sprung on him.”

Logan hung his head, a flash of pain in his eyes. “No, yer right. I never wanted -” he shook his head. “Don’t matter what I wanted. It’s done.”

“Yes, it’s done.” Laura crossed her arms. Suddenly, she understood what Daken meant when he talked about Logan’s ‘martyr act’. Oh, she’d seen it more than once, and her heart had at times ached for him while at others had frustrated her; but this was the first time she found herself so enraged.

She couldn’t be of any help to her family like this; she had to calm down first. Then she could confront Logan, ask him what the hell he’d been thinking, try to devise a way to mend his relationship with Daken. Not before testing the waters with her brother, of course.

But first, she needed to leave. She felt on the verge of breaking something.

She clenched her jaw. “I’m sorry, I need to go. I didn’t mean to spoil your return, Jimmy – I’m glad you’re fine.”

Without waiting for an answer, she stalked away. Logan attempted to call out for her, but he caught himself, rightly realizing this wasn’t the best moment.

She walked quickly, hoping to get to her room without incidents – hoping Gabby wouldn’t be there. She wanted to check on Daken, but it couldn’t do to show up so disheveled. She just had to calm
down; she had to calm down, and then tackle the problem. Regulate her breathing, stop fuming, and calm down –

She collided with someone; she made to apologize, to walk away, but then Jubilee’s scent filled her nostrils, and arms were around her, Jubilee was holding her –

“Sorry,” Laura panted against Jubilee’s chest, grabbing at her, “I left you alone...”

“Oh, no, love, you’re all right. It’s all right.” Jubilee cooed, hugging her tightly. “Shh, it’s all right. I’m here. I’m here, Laura. It’s all right. You’re all right –”

Laura clung to her and held on.

Chapter End Notes

_Next:_ Laura talks it out with Jubilee.

[I like the idea of Lorna as a friend for Daken. They didn’t interact a lot in _X-Men Blue_, but I liked her approach towards him and I think he was at a point in his life where he’d have appreciated it. Let me know what you think! Your comments make my day ^-^ ]
Laura talks it out with Jubilee.

Chapter Notes

**Additional Warnings:** slightly sexual situation with some clinical language. The scene starts from “She loved to kiss Jubilee” and ends at “Of course I’m here.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

26.

It took Laura a while to calm down.

Truly, she didn’t know what had come over her. It had been a matter of seconds, a sort of panicked feeling, a fury; but thankfully Jubilee had found her before she made a fool of herself. Jubilee led her outside, just as Laura had done for Daken, and let her breathe and recenter herself. Laura sat, sensing the telepaths’ prodding and projecting her will to be left alone. She had no stomach for Jean’s cautious approach, not now.

She recalled what Rachel had told her a few days ago: she should tell Logan how she felt towards him, try to uncoil the tight bundle of feelings he elicited now that he’d returned. She certainly should, if she was to mediate between him and her brother.

Logan had infuriated her in the hangar. It was completely irrational – she was quite aware of it – but she’d wanted to strangle him.

And that couldn’t do.

With a sigh, Laura leaned against Jubilee, who sat close, and rested her head against the woman’s shoulder. Jubilee was warm and soft, and her hand came to rest atop Laura’s immediately.

“Feeling better?” she murmured.

Laura bit her lower lip. “I think so.”

“Do you want to tell me what that was about?”

Laura shut her eyes. “Worry, mainly. Frustration. Logan – he did a wretched thing and I couldn’t stomach his face.” Jubilee stiffened, just a bit. Laura knew that there was great affection between them, and she cursed herself. “I’m sorry. I know you care about him -”

“Oh, no, love.” Jubilee gently caressed her knuckles. “I love him, but I know he can be pretty difficult. What did he do?”

Laura gave her the condensed version of events she’d given Polaris, not dwelling on any detail. She was objective enough to recall that conjecture she’d already made, that Logan had probably acted that way on the ill- advised assumption it would protect Daken – but she repeated, firmly, that it was something he’d had no right to lie about.
Laura felt a lump in her throat. “As if Kimura turned out to be alive and Logan told me nothing about it.” It was the closest she could come to convey how frightful and horrifying a violation this lie was. Jubilee’s breath hitched and she wrapped an arm around her, gently comforting her – Laura was shaking, either at the mere idea she’d conjured or at what Daken was going through. Both, possibly.

“Is that why you were gone this morning?” Jubilee asked. Laura ducked her head in shame, but Jubilee pressed a kiss to her temple. “Hey, none of that. It’s all right, love. You were helping Daken?”

“… I tried, yes. He was upset.”

“Understandable.” Jubilee brought Laura’s hand to her mouth, kissed her palm. “Just as it’s perfectly understandable that you’d want to punch Logan in the face, just so you know,” she said softly, a gentle lilt to her voice. “I can help you do that, if you want. I’ll confuse him with my fireworks.”

Laura breathed a laughter, feeling marginally lighter. “No, I shouldn’t. But thanks for the offer.” She tilted her head, Jubilee’s eyes gazing down at her soft and brown, full of concern and love. Laura closed the distance between them and brushed her lips against Jubilee, thankful for her warmth and presence and spirit.

The kiss was chaste and brief, a flutter of lips; then Jubilee tilted her head back. “Whenever you want, love.”

Laura smiled.

They stayed so entangled for a good while still – until she was certain her heartbeat was steady and her breathing normal, until she knew she wouldn’t really bodily harm Logan if she came upon him again – as the evening slowly became dark and damp around them, sounds and lights slowly diminishing in the building behind them.

Eventually, Laura stirred. “I’m going to check on Daken,” she whispered. She’d vacated his side for even too long. But she knew she’d needed the space, the time to breathe. He needed stability; she couldn’t have gone to him as she’d been earlier.

“I’m coming with you,” Jubilee said simply.

So they went. As they walked, Laura dreaded what she could find – she had no way of knowing how his conversation with Storm had gone, but she’d seen him that morning, and in Hank’s lab, and she anticipated seeing a ghost with tormented eyes and the heavy bags under them that were a constant these days -

But she was in for a surprise. The lights in the med bay were out, and he was sleeping soundly, while a small heap of a figure sat curled up in the plastic chair beside the bed.

Upon seeing them, Gabby disentangled herself from her station and came towards them and past them, motioning for them to follow her outside. Laura did so, too stunned to speak, to even think.

When they were far enough from the med bay that they wouldn’t disturb someone with enhanced hearing, Gabby turned to face them. “Where were you?” she pouted, though her tone wasn’t accusatory. Jubilee squeezed Laura’s hand.

“I’m sorry, Gabby. I needed some time.”
Gabby nodded sagely, as if she knew exactly what Laura meant. “Well, I held down the fort. Daken’s eaten, and Hank slipped him a sleeping pill,” she said conspiratorially.

So that was why Daken was sleeping. It had seemed too good, and strange, to be true. Laura made a mental note to thank Beast when she next saw him. “Have you been here for long?” It wasn’t Gabby’s responsibility to check on Daken – she was just a child. Laura had let her stay with Daken for a while, the past few days, but that had just been to keep him some company… not to ‘hold down the fort’. “Have you eaten?”

“Just for some hours, and yes, I ate.” Gabby waved a hand, rolling her eyes. “It was no problem.” Then she yawned, opening her mouth wide. “Met the Human Torch, too. Did you know he’s friends with Daken? He stayed until Daken fell asleep! They were holding hands!”

“Really?” Jubilee’s tone was delighted, gossip that she was. Laura hummed noncommittally – so Daken and Storm had talked something through – and placed a hand on Gabby’s shoulder, steering her towards the sleeping quarters.

“Time for bed, Gabby.”

Gabby didn’t protest – a testament to how tired she was – and followed her meekly. She didn’t even chatter away, but at their door she turned, looking up at her with sleep-filled eyes. “Oh, and Polaris came some time before you, wanted to check on Daken, but he was already asleep. We didn’t speak much. She told me to tell you to be careful.” A bit of a meddling, perhaps, but one thing was for sure: the woman seemed to really care for Daken, and that was good. He needed friends. “Think we can see Jimmy tomorrow?” Gabby yawned. “I wanted to meet him, but Daken needed me more,” she said seriously.

Laura fluffed her hair. “And you did really good, Honey Badger.” In truth, she felt guilty for having left Gabby alone to deal with Daken – but it was done, and there was no use recriminating. “I’m sure Jimmy will want to see you too.”

Gabby yawned again, tears of exhaustion at the angles of her eyes.

Laura opened their door. “I’m going to have a quick dinner, okay? Don’t wait up.”

Gabby crunched up her nose. “I’m perfectly capable of seeing myself to bed,” she said, in quite a passable imitation of Daken’s most pompous voice. Jubilee held back a snicker. Gabby eyed them seriously. “You two should sleep at Jubilee’s again.”

And with that, she retreated inside and closed the door to their faces.

Stunned, Laura turned to face Jubilee, who smirked at her. “From the mouth of babes.”

“Don’t let her hear you call her that,” Laura countered, feeling heat rise to her face. Gabby hadn’t meant what Laura thought she’d meant, right? Some of her befuddlement must show, because Jubilee’s features softened.

“Love, I’d love for you to stay in my room. Maybe it will help?” she said, a touch of embarrassment in her voice. As if she thought she was presuming too much.

“It would,” Laura said firmly. Jubilee’s brilliant smile in return made her chest ache.

Dinner went by in a flash – the teachers’ kitchen was empty, thankfully devoid of Logan, though Laura did catch his scent – and soon they found themselves in Jubilee’s room after a quick trip to check on Shogo, who was being babysat by Starsmore again. Quietened by the exchange she’d
witnessed – Starsmore seemed to adore the kid, and saw nothing wrong with taking care of him for
extended periods of time as his previous partner spent time with her new partner – Laura leant
against the door Jubilee had just closed behind them.

The room still smelt of her. Laura’s scent clung to the furniture, chased Jubilee’s; their scents mixed
in some places – the bed, a chair, the carpet. She recalled, sharply, that morning – Jean’s warning in
her mind, her decision to leave before Jubilee even woke up.

“What’s wrong?” Jubilee was looking at her, a crease of worry on her forehead.

Laura grimaced. “I left you alone, this morning. I didn’t even wake you up -” She hadn’t wanted to
disrupt Jubilee’s rest, but she should have at least left a message. How careless of her! Starsmore
would have been – must have been – far more attentive when they were together.

Jubilee was precious. Laura should focus more on this kind of things; she couldn’t just leave without
warning. She’d thought she’d learned that – she’d thought she’d learned how to be reliable when
she’d taken Gabby in, but evidently she still had much to learn.

“I told you, it’s all right,” Jubilee said softly. “It happens. You were worried, right? It slipped your
mind.” She reached out, caught Laura’s hand.

“You can’t just slip my mind,” Laura murmured. “It was reckless of me.”

“Oh, Laura.” Jubilee closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around Laura. She
was warm – so soft and protective. “It’s normal, with all that’s on your mind. Do you know how
many times I forget important things?” She crunched up her nose playfully, bent her head to nuzzle
Laura’s cheek. “Lots. I’ve a terrible track record, me.”

She was obviously trying to make Laura feel better, but she wasn’t lying. Laura knew that; Jubilee
was terribly forgetful sometimes. “Still. I’m sorry.” She held Jubilee tightly, hoping to convey her
remorse, her love.

“All forgiven.” Jubilee pressed a kiss to the corner of Laura’s mouth.

After a few days, it still amazed Laura how naturally it came to her to tilt her head to respond.
Affection came easily, with Jubilee; with Warren, she’d always been more subdued, sometimes
irritated by his needy displays. But Jubilee felt safe, and sure, so warm and soft in her arms.

She loved to kiss Jubilee. She tasted like cherry, electricity always buzzing at the tip of her tongue.
Laura could spend hours like this – enfolded in Jubilee’s arms, their mouths meeting and parting, lips
brushing the other’s cheeks and eyelids before returning to lips once more. She loved the feel of
Jubilee’s lips on her, of her hands, of being pressed together; she loved it when Jubilee brushed
feather-like kisses below her ear, and she loved when she managed to make Jubilee shudder and
whimper in her arms. Jubilee was especially sensitive to her lower lip being sucked into Laura’s
mouth, and this time was no exception: she shivered, her fingers digging into Laura’s back. Unlike
other times, though, she also moaned and pressed hard her pelvis against Laura’s, her breath
hitching.

There was a pungent smell, the slick noise of vaginal lubrication being discharged. Laura realized
with some trepidation that it came from them both; her own vulva was pulsing. There was an
undercurrent of want beneath her skin, in Jubilation’s scent; without thinking Laura slid a hand
beneath Jubilee’s shirt, felt her hot skin, chased upwards to find Jubilee’s breast. Jubilee rocked
against her, but then she stilled.
She broke the kiss with a sigh and rested her forehead against Laura’s, flushed and bright-eyed. “Everything all right?” Laura asked, her own hand still, inches from Jubilee’s breast. Jubilee must have stopped for a reason.

“Yes, just -” Jubilee bit her lower lip. It was red and plump from their kiss. “Not – not like this, yeah?” She smiled apologetically. “You aren’t really here.”

“Of course I’m here.” Laura cocked her head. But as she said it, she knew it wasn’t completely true – that worry always simmering at the back of her mind. She couldn’t truly let herself go and be there with Jubilee, not with the situation that awaited downstairs. Not with Daken like this. “Sorry, I -”

“No, don’t apologize.” Jubilee pressed a finger to Laura’s lips, smiling softly. “It’s all right. I get it. But our – our first time,” she ducked her head, flushing crimson, “I want that to be perfect. I want you to be able to relax, love.” Laura’s chest tightened painfully; how lovely and considerate Jubilee was. She smiled.

“All right,” she said, brushing a kiss against Jubilee’s finger. “Shall we sleep, then?”

“Yeah. Yeah, you must be dead tired!” Jubilee parted from her with a small wince of longing, but then she smiled brightly, pulling Laura with her towards the en-suite. Before long they were cozily wrapped up in bed, Jubilee having lent her the soft pink pajama she’d already given Laura the previous night. It was a bit too long for Laura, but the excess fabric engulfed her pleasantly; and Jubilee’s arm around her waist was a gentle confirmation.

She was at home, with Jubilee, and she could let herself rest.

Laura came to, registering warm – soft – good in quick succession. As soon as her brain caught up she stiffened, half-expecting Jean to come into her mind again, but nothing came from the telepath, so she opened her eyes.

It was brighter than it should be. They hadn’t overslept, but it wasn’t early either; a quick glance at her phone confirmed it was almost nine. Beside her, Jubilee stirred and sat up with a yawn.

“Mornin’,” she smiled, looking at Laura like she was the sun. Laura’s heart fluttered.

“Good morning.”

Jubilee threw an arm around her, bent to kiss her cheek. “Plans for today?”

“Breakfast together,” Laura said softly. “Then I’ll have to go check on Daken. We’ll keep updated?” she offered.

“Sure! I should really get Shogo back, too.” Jubilee kissed her again and then she was up, cheerful and bright. For a while, Laura watched her move around the room, so animated and buzzing with energy. Her mood was contagious: Laura felt restored, ready to face the day and its challenges.

Once they were both dressed they headed downstairs, their hands naturally linked together. She was so engrossed in Jubilee – in her scent, her smile, her soft hand – that it took longer than normal to realize that she smelt Daken’s scent coming from the teachers’ kitchen.
And, sure enough, he was there – intent, if she wasn’t mistaken, on making tamagoyaki for Gabby.

Standing stock still on the doorway, Laura took in the sight. Gabby sat at the table, chatting away, delighted at being allowed in the room – but then, she always loved it when she got to use it. Pryde was there, too, awkwardly indulging Gabby’s and Daken’s antics. She sat up straighter when she noticed Laura and Jubilee. Gabby turned, alerted by this, and grinned at seeing them.

“Laura!” she shot to her feet and came to hug her. “Daken’s going to stay on our corridor! He has his own room!”

“Does he?” Laura half-embraced her back, a hand lightly caressing Gabby’s hair. She looked from Pryde, who nodded with a set jaw, to Daken, who shot her a greeting over his shoulder.

“That’s great!” Jubilee squeezed Laura’s hand, then moved towards the counter. “Whatcha making, Daken?”

“Omelets. Japanese.” Daken moved some steps to his right, giving her space to work if she needed to. “Do you want one?”

“Thank you! Ohhh, they look good!” Jubilee peered down at them with hungry eyes, then grinned at Laura. “Can I keep him?” Her voice sparkled with mischief, but there was reassurance in her eyes – as if trying to impart on Laura that he seemed to be feeling better.

He did, and it gladdened her to see him like this; but she wasn’t so easily fooled. She could see that he’d recovered from the doctors’ check-up – and the full night of sleep had helped, certainly – but his mental state was another matter entirely. Still, she’d indulge him until she managed to talk with him alone. “You’ll have to ask him,” she answered, infusing her voice with just as much mirth.

“Ah, Jubilation, I wouldn’t dare rob my sister of your beauty,” Daken said seriously as he made another omelet.

“Oi! I told you to call me Jubilee!” Jubilee swatted his arm playfully. Gabby’s hold on Laura’s tightened; looking down, Laura saw that her sister’s eyes were squinted shut – stark, gut-wrenching relief visible on her features. Laura held her back comfortingly. It wasn’t over, not by a long mile, but she’d count this as a victory. The scene was domestic, and thoroughly lovely.

Perhaps thinking she was intruding, Pryde got up. “We’ll, I’ll leave you to it. I’ll keep you informed, Daken.”

“Yes. Thank you, Pryde.” Daken’s voice was, suddenly, tightly controlled. Laura tried to meet Pryde’s eyes, but the woman was gone in a moment, leaving her alone with her family.

Well. A part of it, anyway. Laura patted Gabby’s shoulder, so that she would move away.

Gabby squeezed her hard then released her, going to hop on her chair. “I’m hungry!” she called out, a bit childishly.

“Coming, my princess.” Daken turned on the spot with a flourish, a tray of delicious-looking – and smelling the part – tamagoyaki rolls balanced on one hand. He was smiling, but the smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Laura worried her lip. She couldn’t ask, not here – he wouldn’t like that. Sighing, she moved to sit beside Gabby, Jubilee sitting opposite her. “Hank cleared you?” she said, settling for something neutral. She grabbed a roll from the tray; Gabby was already tucking in.
Daken hummed as he took the seat to Gabby’s right. “I’m going to see him again, but it was absurd to keep me in the med bay. I’m fine, barring the pheromones’ absence.” His jaw tightened.

“Still nothing?”

Instead of answering, Daken picked up his own roll and bit at it pensively. For a while there were only chewing sounds, punctuated by Jubilee’s occasional enthusiastic remarks. Daken cocked his head at those and thanked her, but there wasn’t real warmth in that either. He seemed elsewhere, remote; Laura didn’t like that. Still, there wasn’t much she could do right now; it wasn’t the right moment to corner him.

His phone chimed and he glanced at it to read. The corner of his mouth quirked upwards, but in a strange, melancholic way, and he brushed a finger against the screen in what wasn’t as much a swipe, but rather seemed to be a caress.

The screen blackened and Daken turned towards her. “Well, still no pheromones, no. But now, thanks to the good doctors, we have a lead, and dare I say, for Soteira too. Pryde’s on it already.”

“They reached a consensus?” Hank should have called for Richards quite sooner, then.

“Quite.” Daken crunched up his nose, again with that hard light in his eyes. “Of course, Richards had a head start. He’d met the substance before.”

Laura straightened up, the meal forgotten. “Really?”

Daken hummed, bit at his roll delicately. There was a quiet control in his every movement; she should have seen it sooner. He was almost seething, but he was doing his best not to let Gabby see that. The threat of violence was clear behind the calm mask.

Daken set the roll down, still chewing slowly. Jubilee met Laura’s gaze with a raised eyebrow, but her expression shifted as she read Laura’s. They waited with some trepidation as Gabby ate obliviously on.

“Really,” Daken said softly once he swallowed the small bit down. “You see, he managed to isolate a component of the chemical. It held an uncanny resemblance to the Heat pills.” He shuddered unconsciously. Laura knew the drug had been the reason for the loss of his healing factor years before – the reason why he was dying at the time, why he’d been so desperate that he’d bombed New York.

She knew something else, too. The name of its dealer, who’d been brought into custody years before thanks to Daken himself. He would be as good a scapegoat as any other, considering Daken’s current state of mind – he must be focusing on this threat to avoid thinking about Romulus.

She wanted to reach out and hold Daken’s hand, but Gabby was in the way. Their sister, though, wasn’t as clueless as Laura thought, and grabbed Daken’s hand in Laura’s stead. Daken graced Gabby with a smile, then looked at Laura again.

“Pryde’s looking for Marcus Roston,” he said tonelessly. “She hopes he’ll lead us to Soteira.”

And, judging from the loathing in his eyes, Marcus Roston was likely to not survive the interrogation.
Next: the search for Roston brings out another skeleton from the closet.

[I’m taking a short break, I’ll update on March 10th!
Let me know what you think, your comments make my day ^.^ ]
Another skeleton from the closet.

Chapter Notes

Additional Warnings: mentions of torture, implied child abuse, panic attack.

MOREOVER: I realize that, when I first posted this story, I said that there wouldn’t be non-con elements, or even the smallest mentions of rape. As you might have noticed however, there were a few off-hand comments in some chapters. This is because I strongly believe that Daken is a survivor of sexual abuse, and I couldn’t just hand-wave the issue. I did add the relevant tag (#Past Rape/Non-Con) a few months ago, but I realized it could clash with what I’d said at the beginning and confuse readers. So: although there obviously and adamantly won’t be any rape (on-screen or otherwise) in the present of the story (because that is not the story I’m telling); and although there won’t be any graphic recounting of things that happened in the past; the issue will be addressed, and I’d rather make that clear now than later. I apologize for not clarifying this sooner.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

27.

Marcus Roston had vanished into thin air.

Kitty had done her homework thoroughly, but at some point during the past year and a half Roston had apparently been relocated, and there was no paperwork indicating where, or even who’d done it. He just wasn’t in his cell anymore, a cell he’d been flung into when the Runaways had given him to the authorities while sternly imparting how dangerous he was.

Logan had thought he more or less knew what the man was about. After Daken had blown himself up in New York, Logan had retraced some of his son’s steps, desperately looking for a reason – cut deep by finding that Wolverine doll on his bed, Daken’s scent still clinging to it, its meaning unclear; a mocking gesture? An apology? So Logan had done his research.

He’d learnt that Roston was a psychopath, that he’d framed Daken for a number of horrific murders, that at some point he’d been a member of the Pride. Logan had even tried to speak with the FBI agent who’d been assigned to the case, but the woman had left the agency and wanted nothing to do with him. She’d just told him, on the phone, that his son was deranged and dangerous and she was glad he was dead. But she’d added, quietly, that at least he’d done a good thing in helping catching Roston, even though it had been more of a personal matter for him.

Logan had thought she was talking about the framing.

Now, sitting in the conference room, listening to his son report straight-backed in front of a cohort of X-Men as if he belonged there, he was beginning to get a different picture. Daken had insisted on taking the floor as soon as Kitty had announced Roston was AWOL, and now he was regaling them with a condensed version of what he knew about the man. And what Daken knew – but most importantly, what skirted unspoken at the edges, because Daken valued his own privacy – made
Logan’s hairs stand on end.

Roston was a psychopath. He possessed some form of telepathy and shapeshifting abilities, and used both to play cat and mouse, make people see things that weren’t there, drive them insane. He was out of control: he’d began dealing because he was bored, and he’d fixated on Daken for the same reason. His son stood in front of the X-Men with a clenched jaw and squared shoulders as he told them he’d committed the mistake of underestimating Roston only to discover the hard way that the man was a most dangerous opponent, and the X-Men would do well to tread accordingly.

Revulsion tinged his voice. It was well hidden – Daken must be controlling himself fiercely – but it was there. And Logan couldn’t discern who was its target. On a surface level, one would obviously say Roston… but Logan couldn’t shake the feeling that Daken was just as revolted by himself, or by what Roston had done to him at the time. Because things had certainly happened, and not just a framing job. To speak like this, Daken must have known Roston intimately. He’d tried to play the man, perhaps, only to get played in return – and Roston must have struck where it hurt the most, aided by his telepathy. Logan knew it had been bad: he had only ever smelt Daken sweat this particular, rancid way when Romulus was involved.

Logan searched Laura’s gaze, to see if she was as alarmed as him, but she was looking at her brother, still bent on avoiding him – something he couldn’t blame her for, not with the information she had. It was good to know that she had so firmly Daken’s back; and there was definitely a crease of worry on her forehead, so she must have caught on what Logan had seen.

In truth, most of the X-Men were regarding Daken with interest. One could easily tell that he’d been burnt, and this willingness to bare some of himself to warn them struck a chord. Kitty looked pensive, perhaps reconsidering what she thought about him. The mild almost-there distrust that Logan had sensed when Daken had come into the room with Laura seemed to be dissipating. Logan knew that not everyone might have agreed with Kitty’s decision to let Daken stay, but no one had dared say anything to his face; if Logan hadn’t been in the room beforehand, he might have missed it.

But it was difficult to distrust someone who looked like his son looked right now; the X-Men had always loved to take in broken things. Sure, Daken had cleaned up admirably, his healing factor finally kicking in properly: he moved with poise – slowly, carefully, with elegant purpose. He’d shaved, and fixed his hair too, although his mohawk had yet to make an appearance and he was sporting a perfectly combed bun.

But his eyes were weary and his expression shifted often and no one could easily forget how he’d looked mere days before, laying on that gurney, confused and hurting. They’d all heard him and they’d all seen him, and they’d all seen Logan in the bunker, and mind-control was a nasty thing most of them knew intimately. Seeing Daken so touched by it, still so high-strung, helped them see not the criminal, but a mutant in need of help.

Even those who weren’t there when Daken had been rescued seemed to be treading carefully; and Lorna and Jimmy regarded him in a way Logan couldn’t quite read. Lorna had greeted Daken as soon as he’d entered the room, and his son appeared at ease with her, but she looked at him with ill-concealed worry, perhaps having brought up to speed by Laura. Jimmy hadn’t exchanged words with his brother, but they’d nodded at each other from a distance: a flash of something like regret in Daken’s eyes, Jimmy’s head cocked to the side. Jimmy, too, was studying Daken intently.

Logan would have loved to know what went on in his head, but Jimmy was elusive, preferring Lorna’s company or, inexplicably, Old Logan’s; Logan often saw them together on the premises, and he did his best to bury the funny, uncalled-for punch of jealousy in his guts. Kurt and ’Ro said it
was normal, that Jimmy knew the old counterpart better, that he’d shared many dangers with Polaris; that Logan just had to give it time.

They were right, of course. But in this moment where Daken justifiably kept his distance and Laura gracefully followed suit, Gabby following their lead with a pout and a shrug, Logan had hoped to manage to build something, even brief, with Jimmy. He knew he wasn’t his son, not really – that the boy had a whole life he’d had to leave behind, now completely lost to him; but Jimmy was still his blood. He’d followed Betsy’s advice, though, and he wasn’t wallowing in those nasty feelings. He was opening up more with his partners, allowing them to see more than usual; and he’d been talking with Betsy.

It wasn’t therapy, though. Just conversations.

“Thank you, Daken,” Kitty said. “You were most informative.”

Daken appeared to bite the inside of his cheek – maybe wondering if she was dismissing him, but she looked genuinely grateful, and he settled for a brisk nod. When he was once again seated beside Laura, Kitty spoke again.

“The problem, you’ll forgive me, is that you tried to deal with Roston alone,” she said softly. Daken grimaced. “But we have telepaths, and now that you warned us we’ll be even more careful.”

“Do we think he’s behind Soteira?” Remy said from his place at Rogue’s side.

“He’s certainly behind the chemical,” Hank said. “I worked on it with Reed, and we’re positive: its core component is the same as the drug Heat.”

“This ‘blood of the Pride’ thing.” Bobby leaned against the chair in front of him. “Is it actual blood?” He made a face.

“I’m, ah, afraid so,” Hank adjusted the glasses on his nose. “It’s actually quite fascinating.”

“I’m sure,” Daken said dryly. Hank coughed.

“Ah, yes. My apologies, Daken, Logan.” Daken twitched, resolutely staring ahead. Hank sighed. “At any rate, he’d have needed a laboratory, and resources. Things he didn’t have in prison.”

“Which is why we’re going to question the, um, guy in the cell next to his.” Kitty worried her lower lip, gaze shifting from Logan to Daken. “He might shed some light on where did Roston vanish to.”

“I’m in, of course,” Daken said.

“That won’t be necessary.” Kitty looked almost like she was bracing herself, her hands linked behind her. She sucked in a breath, her eyes slightly glazing in that tell-tale sign of a conversation being held with a telepath.

The trio of telepaths stood in a corner with crossed arms and stony expressions; Jean, in particular, looked downright murderous. Rachel was more sedated, though her jaw was clenched tightly; and Betsy’s gaze flickered, for a moment, towards Daken.

“I’m well-versed in interrogation techniques,” Daken was saying. “Most of them are illegal, of course, but if this guy’s in the same prison as Roston’s he can’t be an angel. You should dispel with the niceties.”

“And how would you like being tortured for information?” Bobby scoffed – then winced, likely
recalling his own run-in with Daken.

“Oh, darling, but I have been. You should try it, terrific stress-reliever.” Daken batted his eyelashes at him, winked when Bobby grimaced. Laura patted Daken’s hand and he sighed, half rolling his eyes.

It was disturbing, to hear him mention it so off-handedly. Logan, too, had had his fair share of torture: he didn’t like to throw it at people’s faces, it happened and he could take it and that was it; but Daken’s attitude was much different. Almost indifferent.

Daken straightened up. “I wouldn’t offer, I know how squeamish you all are, but this is Roston we’re talking about. Going in all lovey-dovey won’t help.”

“Oh, we are going to ‘dispel with the niceties’,” Jean muttered darkly from the corner. “I’m going in; I’ll interrogate the man.”

“Exactly.” Kitty nodded. “Jean will extract any information we need from the subject. Your, ah, ‘expertise’ isn’t required, Daken, but thank you.” She grimaced.

Daken shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

With that, they re-adjourned. As Logan stood up, though, he felt a discreet nudge against his mind. Logan, Betsy’s voice said, Please stay behind a moment.

Logan told ’Ro and Kurt he’d be right behind them, and proceeded to sit back down as the room slowly emptied, some of the X-Men throwing Daken glances and grimaces, perhaps due to his last words.

Daken and Laura, too, were staying seated; Daken had crossed his arms and refused to look in Logan’s direction, but Laura met Logan’s gaze, her expression a bit warmer than the last time they’d talked. Jubilee kissed Laura’s forehead before leaving – and that had been a development he hadn’t seen coming, even though he knew they were close friends; he still had to talk to Laura about it, tell her how happy he was for her and Jubilee.

When the last of the X-Men were gone, Kitty closed the door behind them. Now it was just her, the telepaths, and Logan, Daken, and Laura. That didn’t bode well.

“So, Pryde.” Daken lazily crossed his legs. “I assume we were asked to stay behind so that you could tell us what you were hiding just now.”

With a sigh, Kitty dropped on a chair. “Yes. I’m sorry, Logan, Daken.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. Logan leaned forward, sensing the hesitation and turmoil in her voice. “It wasn’t my intention to lie to you. I thought it might just be best to tell you afterwards, but…” She looked at the telepaths, who were joining them. “It was brought to my attention that wasn’t right.”

Just as it hadn’t been right to go rescue Jimmy without telling Logan – but Logan bit his cheek. It was no use bringing it up now, and Betsy had explained they’d thought it best not to overload him after his confrontation with Daken.

And there was an electricity in the air, something he didn’t like. Laura was furrowing her brow, her eyes fixed on Kitty; beside her, Daken had gone rigid.

“Just get on with it, Pryde,” he ground out. Logan nodded.

Again, Kitty sighed. “The guy from the cell next to Roston – it’s Romulus.”
Daken shot to his feet. Laura vainly grabbed his arm, but Daken wasn’t attacking Kitty:

“You are not bringing him here,” he choked, wide-eyed – his face white as a sheet. “Don’t let him near the children. Laura, take Gabby and go.” He turned towards his sister, wheezing; the implication there was unnerving and horrifying and it tore at Logan’s guts, made him stare helplessly at his son… his poor son.

Logan didn’t dare approach him, try and comfort him; Daken would gut him if he came closer. His son was drowning with panic; if he’d still possessed his pheromones they’d probably have felt everything he was feeling, so utterly he’d lost his composure.

But he didn’t have them back, not yet anyway, and so they were safe from any shifts in their perception – free to see him, to witness the extent of the damage. Logan’s heart ached and he wanted to hold his son, to reassure him – but he couldn’t.

Laura seemed to have it covered. She stood at her brother’s side, her hand laid gently on his arm; and Jean had come closer, she was talking softly: “He’s not coming here,” she was saying, “I’m going to the prison, he’ll stay in the cell. We aren’t risking a breakout, Daken, we know how dangerous he is -”

“The kids will be safe,” Kitty interjected firmly, wonder in her eyes. “Their safety is paramount, obviously.”

Laura shot her a heated glance that screamed ‘Why the hell were you thinking of hiding this?’, and Kitty grimaced, although she stood her ground. Beside her, Rachel looked ashen. Betsy stood at a few paces from the group, her arms crossed, her gaze on Logan.

*Are you all right?* she asked, as if she didn’t know the answer. Logan shrugged; this wasn’t his show. He’d suffered from Romulus’ machinations, yes, but not as much as Daken. He had no intention of making this about him.

Betsy sighed.

“If they’re together,” Daken choked, in a clear attempt to get his breathing under control. His hands were closed into fists, his knuckles white. “If they’re working together, you’re done. We’re all done, I’m done -” A tinge of hysteria appeared in his voice, like shattered glass.

“We’re the X-Men,” Kitty stated. “We’ve faced worse than this. They’re just two men, Daken.”

Daken laughed.

It was a dark, unamused sound. A thing that didn’t belong in the light, so wracked with despair it took the wind out of Logan.

“You need to kill him,” Daken howled, the red of his eyes showing. “That’s the only way you can be sure it’s safe.” He wasn’t talking about Roston, obviously; Roston was a small fish. Take Romulus out of the equation, and Roston was handleable. Romulus was the stuff of nightmares for Daken; the boogeyman, the man in the shadows. How in hell had Logan missed that, years ago?

Jean shook her head. “I can’t do that, Daken. He’s in prison. That’s not how we -”

“Then you’re useless,” Daken snarled. “You could just give him a stroke and no one would even know, but you’re too self-righteous, right? Too stuck up to do what needs to be done.” His voice was getting louder, echoing in the large room – sheer despair manifest to everyone, probably even to anyone still lingering outside. Laura squeezed his arm and he hung on to her like a lifeline, a pale
hand grabbing hers. “I’ll do it,” he said wildly, “Bring me with and I’ll do it. You can even throw me in a cell later, I don’t care.”

Despite all his protestations and his fury, despite the hate in his eyes so many years ago – Logan had a hard time believing that his son would ever manage to follow through. Logan should do it, finish what he’d started. Wouldn’t that be the right gift for his son? Wasn’t that the right thing to do?

*Kill Romulus now, and Daken will never recover,* Betsy said. Logan started, looked up at her. That was nonsense; didn’t she see how the mere mention of his name, the mere prospect of his existence, harmed Daken? *Exactly.* She cocked her head. *Logan, your son needs to deal with what was done to him. If you take the choice away from him, the chance to heal – his sanity will be compromised. He’ll decide when he’s ready.*

*And now he isn’t?*

She frowned. *No.*

“If I thought you could deal with meeting him, I’d let you,” Jean said softly. “But you can’t. Daken, I advise you against it. Your mental health…”

“Oh, I was unaware I’d already undergone your *telepathic eval,* Grey,” Daken spat. “When did you do it? Whilst I was sleeping?”

“I wouldn’t dare,” Jean murmured. Daken scoffed. “Have I given you any reason not to trust my word, Daken?”

Daken moved his head sharply to the side, averting his gaze. For a split second, he met Logan’s eyes – his expression was wild, inhuman – and then he looked away from Logan too, with a grimace. He shut his eyes, sheer exhaustion on his features.

Logan’s heart went out to his son, but even then he didn’t dare getting closer. It was enough, wasn’t it, that Daken was letting him stay, that he wasn’t attacking him for leaving Romulus alive, for the lie he thought Logan had told him? Daken knew who the enemy was. It wasn’t Logan anymore; and Logan could stay and comfort his son with his presence, even if he couldn’t approach him. Laura was squeezing Daken’s arm – speaking gently, trying to ground him back. Logan ached to be there, to help out his son; but he knew that right now, he had to keep his distance.

Was Betsy right? Was Jean right? Was it the right approach to let Romulus live, to be used as a prop for Daken’s recovery?

Wouldn’t that be poetic justice? For the puppeteer to be used in return?

“I care about your well-being,” Jean said. “That’s the only thing on my mind right now. And I can tell you that seeing him now would do you more harm than good. Give yourself time. I assure you, he’s not going anywhere,” she bit out, so darkly that one would almost think she was the Dark Phoenix all over again – her features fierce, full of sharp angles. “Give yourself the satisfaction of being able not to flinch when you’ll finally meet his gaze.” Her eyes lingered briefly over her daughter, who was watching her intently; they shared a bitter expression full of regret.

Daken shuddered, then grimaced: he’d just confirmed that her prediction was spot on. “Flinch, huh? Are you sure you didn’t get into my mind?”

“I’ll only ever do it with your permission, Daken.” Jean returned her attention to him.

“Then do it.” Daken straightened up, looked back at her – his jaw clenched. He seemed less wild
than before, more sedate. “Go and interrogate him and when you come back, Grey, you’ll work on me.”

“With you,” Jean corrected him gently. Logan held his breath – incredulous that she’d just managed to penetrate Daken’s walls, earn his trust so that he’d willingly let her touch his mind. That he’d ask her to, even.

“With me,” Daken amended, a glint in his eyes. “I’ll hold you to it, Grey. Don’t make me regret this.”

She nodded. It was monumental, what she’d just done – and, to Logan’s knowledge, she’d accomplished it with nothing more than a few careful words here and there. He didn’t know if it was a testament to her skill or to the changes in Daken; both, perhaps. The son he’d known would have never bared himself so, would have never allowed such a thing. Hell, he was deathly afraid of telepaths – Logan had heard him cry in fear just a few days ago, seen him try to writhe away from them when all his defenses were down and his body was a puppet with a weak mind. And Logan still remembered the old fiasco with Chuck, that had left Daken with holes in his memory.

Hell, he still remembered what he’d asked Chuck to do, so many years ago. He was grateful Chuck had ignored him. It had led to betrayal on Daken’s part, but at least he hadn’t violated his son’s mind.

He’d always got it so wrong, with his son. But now he was on the right path. And Daken would get better. Jeannie would take care of it. And when the time came – when the timing was right – Logan would tell him he hadn’t betrayed him, he hadn’t lied. And he’d ask forgiveness for what he had done.

But now he had to step aside, and wait.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Daken has a plan.

[We don’t know exactly what happened with Roston after he got a helicopter dropped on himself, but I figured he’d have been thrown in jail. And there aren’t many prisons for super-villains nowadays. So this development was a bit of a given. What did you think of this chapter? Let me know, your comments make my day!]
Daken has a plan.

Chapter Notes

Additional Warning: suicidal ideation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

28.

Waiting was the worst part.

Inaction was a curse and the knowledge of what, exactly, he was sitting out drove Daken mad. He could picture it vividly, shivers breaking his skin: Romulus’ massive body, Jean Grey’s frail figure as she confronted him. Grey was all but fragile and she was the one with all the power in this particular instance and she wasn’t even alone, Braddock would act as back-up – but old habits are hard to break. And it infuriated him that it was so, it infuriated him that the mere prospect of what could be happening at this exact moment filled him with such dread.

Time hadn’t been kind to him. Years before, when he’d thought he was destroying the shackles around his wrists, it had taken him a long time to realize he wanted to rebel, that he should – the truth about his mother was what had tipped him over the edge. The knowledge that he’d never have what he’d bled for, that he’d never counted for anything, that he’d suffered for nothing… all that hadn’t been enough to make him turn against his master; it had been that betrayal, that realization, that mirage of unattained love to spur him to action. It had taken enormous strength to strike against Romulus that day, but he’d done it, because it was fresh and he was hurt and furious.

But then, years had passed. And with them had come the awareness. It had been a slow, horrifying process but he’d undergone it. He’d faced the nightmares and the stray thoughts and the truths crawling under his skin. He’d dissected his life, bit by painful bit. He’d unearthed and questioned the stuttering certainties that a child had clung to in order to survive – that it was good, that he needed it all, that he must become stronger and harder, that Romulus had his best interest at heart.

It was abuse, what he’d lived through. Plain and simple.

When he’d struck against Romulus, that knowledge had already been at the back of his mind, but anger and self-preservation had shoved it aside. Instead, he’d entertained vague thoughts about sacrifices and his own willingness to gain power, because that was, oh, so much easier to handle. He’d been able to lash out, to confront Romulus, to spit out his hate, because he hadn’t yet allowed himself to think the truth. He’d been ‘used’ and ‘deceived’: that was what he’d told himself. Those were the words to describe his life, the weaknesses he’d let Romulus exploit.

But he hadn’t let Romulus do anything. He’d been a damn child. And he’d been abused.

Mixed with the unconditional, terrible love he’d always borne for the monster, there had always been a measure of hate and fear. But not like this. God, not like this; after his “death”, Romulus had morphed from tangible master to shadows whispering at the edge of Daken’s consciousness. And if Daken were to face him now – now that time and distance had made him so much bigger and
monstrous – Jean Grey was probably right that the outcome could be different from what Daken envisioned.

Years before, he’d entertained fantasies of torturing Romulus; now the mere thought made him want to retch. Because he knew the buttons Romulus could push; and he realized that he didn’t want to touch Romulus – that he couldn’t.

And now Romulus might have allied himself with Roston.

Daken wasn’t proud of his visceral reaction in the conference room. Marcus Roston was just an ant, a vicious bastard who’d held Daken down for a while but had eventually been defeated. He was disgusting and he knew more than Daken would have liked, but he was a single man. A mere man.

A man who had the means to affect Daken’s healing factor, his powers, his very mind. To associate such a threat with Romulus made Daken’s blood run cold. It wasn’t the monster’s M.O. - Romulus liked his victims to know exactly what was happening; he cultivated their loyalty with pain and the occasional praise, and he wanted them to know who pulled their strings. A mind-control drug wasn’t his style, but he’d spent years in prison, he that had never been caught through millenia, and he must be angered, willing to employ unusual methods to get back at those who’d wronged him.

It was an alliance made in hell, and Daken was furious that the prospect scared him so. He was warring with himself: battling with worry and abject relief, utterly baffled by how easily he’d let others take matters into their hands; decades of training were screaming at him to get out and pursue his tormentor alone, were telling him that he couldn’t trust anyone.

But he could. He could trust people, he’d learnt it with Laura. He could let them handle the monster, as if he was unimportant, not even worthy of Daken’s attention. The truth was much scarier but wasn’t it sweet, to imagine Romulus pulling so many strings to get back at him and being rewarded instead with Grey’s steely interrogation and Braddock’s contempt?

It wasn’t. He couldn’t contemplate it, couldn’t imagine it, because if he pictured Romulus’ wide body, even if bound, he was lost. He was shivering uncontrollably – he’d been for quite some time now – and not even the scalding water was enough to dispel the feeling, the coldness closing around his heart; the clawed hand squeezing his throat.

This was utterly pointless. Hot showers usually did the trick, but it wasn’t working, and he couldn’t stay in the en-suite forever. He couldn’t hide; he couldn’t let Romulus dictate what he did, his leash still so tight after all these years, with so much distance between them. He was far away: that had to matter for something. It was all right if Daken reacted like this if the monster was close – it wasn’t, it wasn’t, dammit, but at least he’d understand that – but he was… safe here. In this room, in this school, amongst fools who’d accepted him without a second thought, who were taking care of him… taking care of his problem, asking for nothing in return. Just because it was right.

Daken turned off the water and stood, still shivering, his hands held before him. He studied the way his skin healed; at least he still had his healing factor. He retracted his claws, which had come out at some point during his shower, and leaned his forehead against the wall, taking deep breaths.

There was a soft knock at the bathroom door. Laura. “Daken?” she said, quietly. “I’m going to come in if you don’t answer.”

Daken sighed. “I’m coming.” He heard Laura exhale shakily, berated himself for making her worry. He must have lost all sense of time, for her to break into his room; and he must have been completely out of it not to notice the intrusion.
He stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel, dried himself quickly. The mirror was still fogged by steam and he wiped it with a hand, taking in what a sorry sight he made. He’d kill himself rather than letting Romulus see him like this – frazzled, afraid.

He didn’t have to.

He tied up his wet hair in a bun and wrapped a dry towel around his waist, having left his meager belongings in the bedroom.

Laura was waiting for him at the small desk he’d been provided with, her arms crossed rigidly. Her gaze trailed all over him, bluntly searching for any signs of his turmoil; not that she needed to actively look for them. He let her assuage her fears and exposed himself to her scrutiny in silent apology as he browsed the clothing left for him in a drawer. If he was going to stay here, he’d have to reclaim better clothes from some safe-house.

Strange, to contemplate something like that. But, at least until Grey was done with him – until this matter was put to rest – there was no other option.

He settled for an X-Men-themed outfit and gave Laura his back as he got dressed. His fingers trembled as he buttoned his jeans; it wasn’t the only part of him still shaking, he could feel himself practically vibrating, but Laura gracefully ignored it.

Or not.

“Daken,” she murmured when he was finished. “It’s all under control. He won’t escape, they won’t let him.”

“I know.” Intellectually, he did. With a sigh, Daken turned to face her, her brow pinched with worry although she was trying to smooth her features in reassurance. “It’s… difficult,” he admitted. “Staying here, doing nothing. Waiting for news.”

She nodded. “You’d have preferred to be there.” She bit her lip, as if to avoid saying what he knew she must be thinking – Grey was right; he was in no condition to face Romulus.

“No.” Daken crossed his arms, held himself tightly. He leaned against the dresser, searching for words. “Yes. But I… see that I can’t. I need clarity first, I… I don’t want to be so affected by this, by him anymore. And I fear what I could do if I found myself before him.”

There was a foul taste in his mouth, but it had to be said: he couldn’t even trust himself. Hate and pain run through his veins but just a few words, black eyes glinting as a leer formed on Romulus’ face – and what would Daken do then? Would he stay strong, do what needed to be done? Would the hate overcome the fear? Or wouldn’t he, perhaps, revert to a sniveling child, confronted with the truth hammering his skull?

Laura approached him as if he was a scared animal. She laid a hand on his arm – slowly, giving him the chance to recoil. “When Kimura caught me,” she murmured, and he knew by the way she chased away a revulsed shudder that it affected her to speak of this, that she was doing it for his sake, “it was hard. I would have easily turned to despair if Gabby hadn’t called for help. I was alone and completely helpless, under her control. Her weapon, to be used as she wanted.” She grit her teeth; he covered her hand with his and squeezed. He knew what she was talking about. Their leashes couldn’t have been more different, but the both of them were tight, and chafed them raw. “You’re not alone,” she added, quietly.

He nodded. “I’m not alone,” he repeated, tasting that truth on his tongue. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there
for you, for Kimura.” That, too, needed to be said. He’d been otherwise occupied – turning into his former tormentor, fighting to keep the darkness at bay; ultimately, failing. He’d failed a lot of people: hurt them so; let them down. Laura… Johnny… Zach.

God, Zach.

Daken turned his head, a wave of nausea washing over him.

“Hey, hey.” Laura shook him gently. “It’s all right. I survived, and you survived, and we’re here. And I’m here for you, Daken.”

‘I want to be there for you.’ Daken took a breath, then another, and another, until he felt he had it all under control again. He needed – God.

“Get me out of here,” he whispered. If she left him to his own devices, he’d call Johnny. They’d fallen into old habits quickly – exchanging messages as soon as Daken had woken up the day after Johnny’s visit, a comfortable back and forth that made him breathe easier – but this would be too much for Johnny. Too much darkness to face. Daken didn’t want him to battle these things for him: Johnny was bright and kind and he’d deflate under the pressure of this damn void that was taking Daken’s life again. He’d do it, because that was just who he was; but Daken didn’t want to saddle him with such horrors.

He didn’t want to turn Johnny into a crutch for his trauma. Johnny didn’t deserve that.

He followed Laura out of his room; Gabby was peering at the corridor from her door, and she opened it wide when she saw them, her little face crunched up with worry. He winked weakly as Gabby approached him just as carefully as their sister. He could read her easily: she wanted to fling herself at him but she didn’t dare to, mindful of his state. So he held out his arms, willing a smile to form on his face. The little one deserved some peace of mind; he knew how worried she was about him.

She hugged him then. Not too tightly – just right. He held her back and fluffed her hair, unbelievably grateful for her presence, for her decision to bring him under her fierce wing.

He met Laura’s gaze over Gabby’s head; his sister seemed to be contemplating something, her gaze flickering between them. At the question in his eyes, she cocked her head.

“Let’s take a walk outside,” she said. “It’s a sunny day.”

“Yes!” Gabby exclaimed, jumping up and down, her voice muffled by his chest. “Light and air! Hank said you needed that!”

“He did,” he agreed, brushing her hair. But it was the middle of the afternoon: classes were over; there would be students about.

He hadn’t cared about shocking the children, before. But just the previous day he’d gone for a jog before dinner, thankful that he was finally out of that wretched med bay, that things seemed to be moving in some direction… and he’d spotted Zach some ways off the path.

He was with other kids – boys his age. Friends, Daken hoped. All with a slightly damaged look that it tore at him to see on Zach too. The morose ones, the outcasts, those the X-Men seemed to be too tired to care for. The rebels.

Zach had spotted him, too. He’d crunched up his nose and a whiff of anger and jealousy had reached Daken and then he’d turned on his heels abruptly, left his friends there. The same reaction from the
day before, in the med bay – when Johnny had said he and Daken were friends.

Daken didn’t need to know Zach as well as he regrettably did to know that Zach was annoyed because he felt abandoned. He’d clung to Daken, in those wretched Death Seed-tinged weeks, only to be left off at the school like garbage when Daken didn’t need him anymore. Then Daken was back and instead of looking for him, he’d preferred the company of others.

And it was for the best, that Zach believed in this version of events. His affection was trauma-induced, and Daken would rather die than encourage him.

Then again, perhaps, if Zach were to see him again, with much more company – he’d distance himself more from Daken. A sense of betrayal would cut all remaining ties.

“You know what,” Daken said, ignoring the pang in his chest and Laura’s pursed lips as she sensed something was amiss, “Let’s make an outing of it.”

“Yes!” Gabby cheered, hugging him tightly. “Can we do a picnic? Can we tell Jimmy? And Jubilee? And, and –” she kept on firing off suggestions, and he laughed and agreed to everything. Once she was on board, there wasn’t anything anyone could do to stop this. They’d have a damn feast.

He resolutely ignored the way his stomach churned.

Their impromptu party consisted of himself, Laura, Gabby; Jubilee, her spawn and the ex-boyfriend; Lorna and Jimmy; LeBeau with his wife; and Old Logan, slowly recuperating from his adamantium poisoning.

‘Have fun!’ Johnny had texted him. Daken ached for him, for his presence; but he’d decided not to pollute him, and he’d stick to the plan.

Have fun. If only Johnny knew how far removed from that concept Daken could be, on a day like this. This was just a distraction, a way to take his mind off what was happening miles from here; and if he happened to shatter Zach’s heart too, all the better.

It wasn’t what he wanted Johnny to ever associate with.

Johnny hadn’t asked to be invited. Despite the easy rhythm they’d fallen into, they had yet to discuss seeing each other again. Talking like this was easy exactly because they weren’t together, their shared baggage unspoken. The things they’d said to each other in the med bay lingered, but weren’t mentioned again. It was like years before, but now Daken was set on never hurting Johnny again. And damn him if he didn’t make good on that promise.

“You know,” Lorna said lightly, sitting beside him on the grass. “Broodily staring off into the distance might scare them all off, but not me.” She produced a plastic box. “Egg salad?”

Because they were all walking on eggshells around him. “Cute, Lorna.” With a sigh, though, he accepted her offering, putting some of the questionable substance onto a plastic plate. “This is all so environment-friendly,” he noted.

“It’s biodegradable, you heathen,” she scoffed. “You think Hank would let them use real plastic?”

“Your friend’s a tyrant.” Banter was a pattern he could focus on; he didn’t know if Lorna was doing it on purpose, but he was grateful for it. He was especially grateful she’d lost that worried expression
she’d worn all day prior and that morning, at the meeting.

Where she’d lost it, though, they’d all gained it— even Jimmy. News of Grey’s mission had spread, and while none had been present to witness his breakdown in the conference room, it didn’t take a genius to know he might be upset. Not to mention the despicable bags under his eyes and the haunted look he couldn’t manage to dispel.

Old Logan had even squeezed Daken’s shoulder with a stoic expression, and it had taken all of Daken’s self-control not to flinch at his resemblance with Logan.

He turned his thoughts away from Logan’s pained expression from that morning, in the conference room. It was just a reminder that this could have been avoided. He didn’t know what the hell Logan had thought he was playing at, leaving Romulus alive… hiding it from Daken…

He shouldn’t think about this. Logan was just an idiot; he wasn’t the enemy. He was just a clueless bastard.

Daken tuned in to his surroundings again. Gabby was playing with Jubilee’s kid, Shogo, and the woman’s ex-boyfriend, a sort of saint. Laura sat opposite from Daken: she was holding hands with Jubilee, but couldn’t seem to manage to relax into the woman’s embrace, too tightly wrapped in her worry for Daken. Jubilee didn’t seem to mind, though, and squeezed Laura’s hand every now and then, engrossed in conversation with Rogue and LeBeau, who’d come just because the latter was friends with both Laura and Jubilee. The newlyweds hadn’t engaged him past a polite greeting and some small talk, but that was good; his previous interactions with the both of them had been vicious, and he counted it as a victory that they were tolerating him for Laura’s sake.

A little to the side were Old Logan and Jimmy. Old Logan seemed content with simply sitting there, squinting his eyes at the sun—probably just happy to still be alive. Jimmy was another matter entirely; he seemed out of place, as if questioning his own presence. The alien’s slick smell clung to him like rot, but he seemed to have it all under control and, after all, the telepaths had vetted him.

Still, he wasn’t talking. It seemed he’d grown into a man of few words.

His own encounter with Daken, the day before, had been a brief affair. He’d thanked Daken for turning the X-Men’s eye on him, and Daken had gracefully accepted. They hadn’t mentioned that time Daken was sent to kill him, to dispose of the threat. The both of them knew it had been an inevitability.

Daken’s musings ground to a halt as he caught the scent of the one he’d set out to hurt. He braced himself; it wouldn’t be pretty. But it was for the best: for Zach’s best. Never more than in this moment, Romulus’ threat looming closer, had Daken been surer that Zach didn’t deserve to cling to Daken’s memory.

Daken had counted on being caught talking and laughing, so he turned to Lorna to make conversation, catching Laura’s gaze as he did so. His sister’s lips were thinly pressed together: she’d smelt Zach, too, and probably guessed what he was doing.

He couldn’t talk with Lorna, though, because she was rigid— her eyes twin slits of fury. “What the hell’s *that*?” she hissed, loud enough that conversation died out around them.

They all followed her line of sight. She was staring at none other than Zach, who stood at a few yards from them and was staring right back at them in challenge, his hands thrust in his pockets; his shoulders raised, chin tilted up.
He was looking directly at Daken. But Daken couldn’t look him in the eyes. Not because of shame, though that feeling gnawed at Daken’s insides at his mere presence.

But because – and fury was rushing hot in Daken’s veins at the sight, pulsing in his ears – the sunlight was caught by a metallic contraption around Zach’s neck.

A power dampener. Zach was wearing a fucking power dampener.

Chapter End Notes

*Next: Daken’s plan backfires.*

[The return of the power dampener! That monstrosity, I remind you, is canon. We never saw how they were going to resolve that, given *Iceman* was canceled and when it returned Zach was nowhere in sight, shipped off to that strange crossover with Spider-Man and Iron Fist.
What did you think about this chapter? Let me know, your comments make my day ^-^]
The change in Daken was immediate.

One moment, he was wearing the tortured expression that had clung to him ever since that morning, that had worried Laura sick and prompted her to break into his room. The next moment, his features filled with righteous purpose, the plan Laura supposed he’d concocted forgotten in the face of the injustice in front of him.

It should have crossed her mind that of course he didn’t know about the power dampener. He hadn’t been at the school to witness Zachary’s dangerous temper tantrums, and Laura had thought better than telling him, knowing how he would react to the X-Men’s solution – how he’d perceive Zachary’s predicament as his fault. She hadn’t wanted to burden him any further than he already was by his ordeal with the Death Seed, by the guilt gnawing at him.

But now Daken was here and it had only been a matter of time before Zachary vacated the high-collared shirts he used to hide the power dampener, or before the fabric gave way to show a glimpse.

And it seemed that Zachary was showing it off on purpose, as a sort of challenge to Daken. A way to catch his attention.

Well, he had. Daken turned onto Laura in an instant, his expression fierce. “Tell me it’s not what I think, Laura,” he growled – betrayal all over his face. It was clear that he couldn’t believe she’d known... but that her total lack of surprise was answer enough.

She couldn’t answer, words suddenly failing her. Wasn’t this what Logan himself had done to Daken – hide an unpleasant truth in an effort to protect him?

Jubilee squeezed her hand comfortingly, but it was Remy who answered. “It is what you think,” he said quietly, with a grimace. He didn’t like it just as none of them did, but it had had to be done. “The boy was a danger to himself, and to others.”

“Did you know about this?” Daken cut him off, addressing Laura. His jaw was clenched, his eyes ablaze with a feverish light – he was catching up. He knew what this meant and he knew why Zachary would be deemed a danger to others. Because of him, of what he’d done.

He shut his eyes.

She found her voice and sat up, a hand raised in an attempt to placate him. “I did. Daken -”
“Lorna,” Daken choked out, speaking over Laura. He turned towards Polaris, his head cocked to indicate Zachary. “Please,” he croaked.

Polaris was grim, green lights crackling around her. “Abso-fucking-lutely,” she snarled.

Before any of them could say anything more, she gestured abruptly in Zachary’s direction. The power dampener shimmered, melted, dropped to Zachary’s feet. The boy started, stared down at it; when he looked up again, his chin was trembling. There was a watery smile on his face and then – Laura braced herself – he let out a sob.

It was like being hit by a shock-wave. The sounds, the scents – it was all muffled, mundane. What an ordinary person might hear and smell.

Zachary was canceling their powers. He wasn’t doing it on purpose; he’s simply lost control of them. There was a reason, although despicable, why he was wearing that wretched thing.

The children closer to Zachary were giving him a wide berth, retreating to the school in a hurry. Zachary was undergoing an ugly crying fit, features distorted by wracking sobs. Beside Laura, someone sharply took a breath and she turned: Daken sat white-faced, staring at the boy, a mixture of emotions flickering in his eyes – guilt the most prominent.

Damn it.

“What’s happening?” Polaris demanded. Her fingers were fanned out, as if she was trying to reach out for her powers and obviously failing. Jimmy was cradling his head, and Laura’s blood ran cold, recalling – far too late – that he was the host of an alien threat.

Jimmy saw the unnerved look she gave him, and shook his head.

“The Poison’s under control,” he muttered.

“Yes, good.” Polaris patted his arm. “But what’s happening? Why aren’t any of you more worried?”

Rogue bit her lower lip. “It’s the boy. He deletes and amplifies powers. ’aving trouble with that,” she grimaced.

To the side, Starsmore had yanked his polo up, to avoid scaring Shogo. Jubilee reached out to hold her son, cradling him to her bosom with a pinched expression – likely remembering when she’d lost her powers. Even Gabby was grimacing; Laura held out her arms, and Gabby went to her fast, a ball of trembling limbs. She hid her face against Laura’s stomach.

Remy sighed. “We just have to wait. Someone will come with another collar.”

“Absolutely not,” Daken snarled, shaking himself out of his grieving stupor. “I thought he was safer with you idiots!” He winced. “And you, you fucking.”

“I agree with Daken,” Polaris added, although she’d blanched. She laid a hand on his arm, and he let her. Laura didn’t dare to; he was furious with her right now. “I’m sure there’s another way.”

“Stay away from him!” Daken shouted, something else having caught his attention. Laura turned to follow his gaze; Pryde was coming out of the building, a collar in hand, her target clear. Daken scrambled to his feet and set off for the crying figure of the boy he’d avoided for so long, the child he was terrified of having hurt.
This would either go terribly wrong… or heal some wounds. But Daken was far from stable right now, and that worried Laura. Wincing, she shook lightly Gabby, but her sister was already disentangling herself from her.

“Go,” she muttered.

Laura went.

Daken had reached Zachary, but instead of going for him he moved to shield him from Pryde, arms spread wide, eyes fierce and almost crazed. Rachel, walking some feet behind Pryde, reached her partner with a few quick steps and grabbed her arm. Pryde turned abruptly, incredulity painted on the lines of her face; Rachel said something, quickly, too low for Laura to catch without her powers. Pryde stayed put.

Daken turned to finally face Zachary. The boy had slipped to his knees, and Daken knelt before him. His arms did a little awkward dance, as if he was pondering if to touch Zachary; but then he let them fall heavily to his sides.

When she was close enough to finally hear, Daken was quietly talking Zachary through a breathing exercise. Daken’s shoulders were set, rigid, his hands closed into white fists that pushed onto the dirt; but none of that tension showed in his voice. It was calm and measured and it obviously wasn’t the first time, as Zachary was calming down, his sobs turning into small hiccups.

“That’s it,” Daken praised the boy. “Very good, Zach, you’re doing great.” A vein pulsed on the nape of his neck, all his muscles taut with self-loathing – Laura knew the signs. And yet he went on, focusing only on the child in front of him. “Now, as we practiced, remember?” Daken shuddered, but his voice kept steady. “One, two -”

Zachary exhaled, his shaking body relaxing minutely, his breathing under control now. Laura felt a tingle at the tips of her toes, almost there… but then it was gone.

“Almost,” Daken said. Zach crunched up his nose, tears-streaked cheeks reddening. “It’s all right, you’re doing great,” Daken murmured. “Let’s try again. One, two -”

Zachary exhaled and the world burst to life again, so starkly that Laura had to take a step back. Scents filled her nostrils and noise came back to her ears, so she knew, without taking her eyes off the duo, that they’d gathered somewhat of an audience. And Daken did too, the small jerk of his head a sure sign that he smelt Logan standing at a few yards from them.

Or perhaps Daken had smelt Iceman – if the way he suddenly got to his feet and positioned himself to stand just between the man and Zachary was anything to go by.

Pryde spoke up. “That was… greatly appreciated. Zach, if you’d wear your collar again…” The boy finally opened his puffy red eyes, clearly pleading with Daken. But there was no need for pleading.

Daken turned to stare daggers at Pryde. “Are you out of your fucking mind?” he hissed. The angle allowed Laura to see his grimace. “What is this?”

Pryde sighed. “Look, you saw how it is. He can’t control his powers, and we can’t go around fearing he’ll delete ours. This school is constantly under attack, we have a duty to our students -”

“No, they like to hit him too,” Daken spat. Laura could feel Iceman’s full-bodied flinch even from
this distance. “Real heroes, aren’t they?”

“How do you think I feel about that?” Pryde snapped, coming closer to them – her partner lingering behind her. Others were approaching, moving slowly, still feeling their powers returning. “We’re doing all we can. Zach’s in therapy, but we can’t just stand by for all the time it will take him to overcome all the shit you put him through!”

Daken recoiled, eyes downcast – the adrenaline and worry and fury giving way to the guilt that was flooding him, that he’d managed to keep at bay up until this moment. He moved to leave, but Zachary shot his arm outward, to yank at Daken’s jeans. Daken stood frozen, gaze fixed on the hand closing around the fabric; they all kept still.

In the silence that ensued, Zachary’s small whimper was a stark punch to the gut. “You’re leaving again. Why? I thought you cared. I almost thought you didn’t, but you do.” With his free hand, he reached out for the collar that Polaris had wrenched from him. He knew who to thank for it; Polaris would have freed him anyway, perhaps, but Daken had asked her, and the boy had seen that. He’d seen how Daken had reacted upon seeing the power dampener.

Daken was visibly keeping it together just barely, a moment away from coming apart at the seams. He was tightly coiled, so pale Laura would have wondered about his blood circulation if she couldn’t have heard his heartbeat. He bore that same heart-shattering expression she’d witnessed when she’d found him in his safe-house, when he was beating himself over what he’d done to Zachary. Laura had been right: with their picnic, he’d been trying to impress upon Zachary that he was unimportant. But seeing him so defeated had shattered something inside Daken, made him reconsider and come to the boy’s rescue. And now he was here – and Zachary needed an answer.


Zachary sniffled, shook his head vehemently. “You didn’t! It’s all lies, it’s what they think!”

“Zach.” Pryde took a few steps towards them, the collar swinging by her side as she walked. She stopped when she saw Daken’s glower. “You’ve been talking about this. With your therapist,” she said pointedly. “Haven’t you? You went cold turkey from MGH. You aren’t controlling your powers -”

“Because I hate you people!” Zachary snapped, wiping at the snot under his nose. “Because you don’t understand -”

“Because you aren’t facing the fact that you were kidnapped, Zachary,” Rachel spoke up, coming to stand beside Pryde. She crouched, her head cocked to the side. “It’s all tangled in there, I know.” She placed a hand on her chest. “We didn’t look after you as we should have. You feel as if Daken saved you from us -”

“He did,” Zachary snapped. Daken cursed under his breath in Japanese, ‘kuso.’ Then he sat down, eye-level with the boy – every movement screaming unease at having to do this here, out in the open, with so many witnesses.

“I thought so too,” he said, horribly quietly, making Laura’s hairs stand on end. Zachary looked up strangely, registering the eerie change in Daken’s voice. “When a monster took me under his wing, I thought he was saving me. I was alone and I couldn’t have survived on my own and I thought that everything he did was for my sake, but it wasn’t, Zach. I did kidnap you. I didn’t accidentally find you on the streets, I was keeping tabs on you. I took you from their care -”
“Some care!” Zachary snarled. “Man, you’re not a monster, okay? I’m fine, see?” He spread his arms to show he was physically fine.

“You’re not fine.” Daken’s voice was straining at the edges. “You can’t even control your powers now, and that’s because of me. I used you for my gain. I hurt you -”

“I’m fine! You never even touched me!” Zachary insisted. Daken shuddered violently, and that finally gave the boy pause, made him consider the man in front of him and his words. “Man, you okay?” He reached out gingerly, but Daken recoiled.

“I did,” Daken choked out, ignoring the question and Zachary’s hurt expression. Daken swayed, landed a hand against the dirt to keep himself upright. Laura moved to help him, consequences be damned, but he spoke again. “I did, didn’t I? I hit you, I -” His voice broke.

Laura held her breath. He hadn’t told her that. He’d told her he hadn’t harmed the boy, though the possibility of having almost done so ate at him -

Rachel made an aborted motion, going for his arm, but then she let her hand land upon her thigh.

“I knew it!” Pryde seemed ready to pounce on him, but Rachel shot to her feet to hold her back. “You hit him, and you have the nerve to attack Bobby for that?”

Daken slammed a hand against his mouth, keening. Laura stood, uncertain. What was happening? He hadn’t been lying to her, she’d have smelt it –

“Kitty, stop,” Rachel said. “He’s remembering now, he’s recalling it right now. It wasn’t him, Kitty!”

“What?” Pryde snarled.

“It’s true,” Zachary spoke up. He’d blanched, and he was looking at Daken as if he’d never seen him before. “It was the Death Seed, you know that! I could always sense it. I’ve told you this!” he added frantically. “When it got bad he threw himself into the secure room. He’s never, like, hit me hard or anything – Jesus Christ!”

An iron pang hit Laura’s nostrils and her heart almost stopped, her body moving futilely to stop what was already done.

“Oy gevalt!” Pryde wheezed, mouth agape. Daken dropped down on the grass – his tidy new hairstyle made it easier to see the tip of his wrist claw protruding from the top of his head.

Polaris was at his side in an instant, kneeling and angling herself to hide him – at least partially – from a wide-eyed, white-faced Zachary. Laura stood, uncertain whether her own help would be well-received, and watched Polaris’ hands dance awkwardly by Daken’s head. “Daken?” the woman whispered, fingers gingerly brushing the hair around the claw tip. “Can you hear me? Can you retract your claw?”

Daken flinched, half-rolling away from her.

He was still breathing. His breath stuttered around the claw stuck into the roof of his mouth, making the words he was blabbering almost unintelligible – it seemed Latin.

Laura knew those words.

She whirled to face the entrance. “Get him to Hank!”
Kurt teleported beside them immediately, Logan in tow. Their father bent to scoop Daken up and it didn’t matter what had happened, it didn’t matter that Daken would hate her even more for allowing that. She saw that Logan needed to feel useful in this moment of shock; and she needed to stay here, assess the damage.

She nodded at Logan – his hand squeezed Daken’s arm, his eyes widening as he caught Daken’s uncoordinated words, now turned to Japanese as he struggled weakly – and Kurt took them away.

Taking a deep breath, Laura tuned in to her surroundings – Pryde, still staring at where Daken had lain; Polaris, wiping her blood-stained fingers on the grass; Rachel, her gaze fixed on Zachary, a grimace on her face… Zachary.

The boy had fallen hard on his behind, and he, too, was staring at the spot where once lay Daken, the grass dark with blood. He looked about to feel ill.

“Is he gonna be okay?” he asked with a small voice.

Laura shook herself. The boy needed reassurance, needed to know it wasn’t his fault. “Of course,” she told him firmly – she told herself, too. “He has a healing factor, remember?”

“Right.” Zachary squinted his eyes – another crying fit looming ahead, his heartbeat wild, his breathing labored. “Gimme that thing, teach.”

He held out a hand. Wordlessly, Pryde gave him the power dampener.

Polaris made a sound of protest. “That’s not necessary -”

“It is,” Zachary snarled as he put the collar on. “I could lose control again. And take out all your powers. Including his healing factor.” The collar sealed itself with a metallic clink. “I’m gonna get better,” he said decisively. He nodded to himself, his mouth a thin line. “Yeah. But until that, I’m gonna keep this on. Don’t you try and melt it again. Though it was awesome.” His features crumpled and he sniffled. “Okay?”

Polaris nodded, her gaze soft and sad. “Of course.”

“Right.” Zachary went to his feet. He was shaking like a leaf – seeing someone stab themselves in the head would be traumatic enough, but Zachary knew and cared about Daken. Laura only hoped the boy hadn’t put two and two together.

The kid half-stumbled away, but Rachel was there to hold him up. “Let’s get you to your room, yes? You should rest. Do you want me to reschedule with your therapist?”

Zachary’s muffled ‘yes’ haunted Laura as Rachel lead the boy away. She looked around, defeated: others were leaving, thankfully not lingering on the scene. Iceman threw her one last glance – she saw clearly his grimace – and retreated inside, far before Rachel and Zachary reached the entrance.

Pryde was ashen. “Laura. I’m sorry about -”

“Pryde.” Laura took a shuddering breath, steeled herself. “You heard Rachel. He wasn’t himself -”

“Fuck, Laura, of course we won’t turn our back on your brother!” Pryde ran a hand through her hair; she looked just as rattled as Laura felt. “I mean, I’ll most definitely keep Zach the hell away from him but that was -” Mercifully, Pryde bit her tongue. “We’ll still help him, Laura. You have my word.”

Relief almost sagged Laura down. “Yes. Thank you. I… appreciate that.”
Pryde gave her a small, sympathetic smile. “Try to breathe, Laura. Try to breathe.” With that, she turned on her heels and left, likely to assess the situation – perhaps to check on Jean and Braddock, too. Laura hoped they’d be back soon.

Oh, God.

She smelt Jubilee’s comforting scent before she found herself held tightly from behind. She let out a shaky breath, horribly grateful for her presence. Gabby hugged her too, shaking slightly. She’d seen. Laura hated that Gabby had seen that.

Laura had never seen it, either. Oh, she’d guessed about it, and witnessing reckless behavior was one thing, but this – this was different. Even seeing him ready to die, in his mind, days before, hadn’t borne the same significance to her. And when he’d tried to do the same, in the Soteira facility, he hadn’t been himself –

“It’s all right,” Jubilee murmured behind her. “I promise, it’s going to be all right.” Laura didn’t answer, just tightened her hold on Jubilee’s arm, and around Gabby.

She met Polaris’ gaze: the woman knew exactly what had happened. It had been no accident; Daken hadn’t ‘lost control’ in his shock as apparently new memories of his time under the influence of the Death Seed resurfaced, perhaps triggered by what Zachary had said, by what he himself was saying just before.

She hoped Zachary would think it had been an accident.

Jimmy was next, coming to stand beside her, his gaze fixed on the rapidly reddening patch of grass. Then came Old Logan, moving stiffly; and Remy, too, came closer, his expression as comforting as it always was.

“Courage, petite,” he said. “Jean’s the best. She’ll fix this.”

Laura nodded, a lump in her throat. Jean would help. She had to.

Laura knew the impulse that had taken Daken. She’d fought it herself, for so long. She knew he needed help – but she knew nothing would happen if he didn’t want it. If he didn’t realize that doing that wasn’t the answer.

If he didn’t forgive himself first.

If he didn’t stop thinking he was one step away from turning into the monster that had destroyed his life.

Jimmy turned to look at her. “It was deliberate, wasn’t it? He tried to kill himself.”

Daken had done it to protect Zachary, that was still at the stage of defending the abuse. Perhaps he’d even counted on the fact that if Zachary lost control again, right in that moment, shocked by the scene in front of him – he’d stay dead.

‘Quod sum eris,’ he’d been whispering, trying to whisper really, his synapses damaged by the claw embedded in his brain. ‘Watashi ga shindemo sore wa okoranaideshou,’ she thought he’d been saying, as their father held him in his arms.

‘I am what you will be.’ The words that Logan had told her Romulus used to taunt him with. It was only natural to think that the monster would keep telling them to Daken too.
And, if she’d heard correctly: ‘That won’t happen if I die.’ Confronted with the knowledge that he’d been far more physical with Zachary than what he remembered, there really was only one thing that Daken had thought of doing, his already horrific remorse now eating him alive.

Laura hung her head, and she didn’t answer Jimmy.

There was no need to, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Next: A conversation in the med bay.

[Daken did hit Zach. It is, regrettably, canon, and one of the reasons why I hated Sina Grace’s Iceman with a passion. Why are we hearing about it just now? Well, there’s no consensus on what recovering from a Death Seed possession is like but considering Daken’s trauma, this is one of the things where his brain would go “nope!”, in my humble opinion. Yes he had some vague recollection of training Zach but he blanked on some details. Not the only things he blanked on, but spoilers! Let me know what you think! Your comments keep me going ^-^ ]
Chapter Notes

**IMPORTANT** Updates are on hold until further notice, my laptop died and it's being repaired.

**Additional Warnings:** discussion of suicide, mentions of filicide, abuse apologism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

30.

“You should have burned my body,” Daken muttered, eyes shut.

Logan started. He was about to leave the med bay; Hank had done all he could, gently coaxing Daken’s claw out of his skull and medicating the closing wound. They’d put Daken – who’d been drugged into unconsciousness when it had become clear he’d fight Hank’s ministrations – in the old secure room, and then Hank had left the two of them alone. Logan had sat vigil until Daken’s eyelids had moved; at that point, Logan had known he wouldn’t be welcome, and he’d got up.

Now he stood, uncertain – Daken looked so frail and young, laying there. So utterly lost. Logan ascribed to confusion Daken’s words as he came to; he didn’t want to think about what they meant. Nevermind that they confirmed what he’d said after stabbing himself, his behavior as Hank tried to help him. Nevermind that just a few days prior, while trying to get him back to his body, Jean had said his son was ‘letting go.’

Was his boy suicidal?

Logan fought the constriction in his chest, cleared his throat. “You’re awake. Good. Want me to call Laura? She’s right outside.” He wondered why she hadn’t come in yet. She’d looked distraught, pale and thin-lipped. He was grateful for Jubilee’s presence beside her.

Daken exhaled. “… No.”

Logan frowned. “Lorna, then? Um, Jimmy? They’re outside, too.” He had no idea how close they were to Daken, but certainly closer than *Logan*.

“No. Sit down.” Daken clenched his jaw. Logan took a deep breath.

“You… remember where you are, yes? What happened lately? You told me, huh, you wouldn’t speak to me again –”

“I know what I said,” Daken said tiredly. “Sit the fuck down, Logan, I can’t make you.” He moved his hands to make his point – his hands, tied to the bed and encased by adamantium. For his sake, Hank had said. Just until Jean came back and got a look at him.

Logan sat down on the plastic chair by the bed. He was hit by the overwhelming urge to touch his son’s arm – but he knew that, handcuffs or not, Daken would make him pay for that. So he sat,
cradling his hands in his lap. Normally, he’d have welcomed this opportunity to talk, after his fuck-up… but what if Daken wasn’t quite himself right now, and would tear at him later for taking advantage of his state?

Betsy would have chastised him for such a thought. ’Ro and Kurt would have supported her. Daken was a grown man, not a boy – capable of making his own decisions.

But when such decisions entailed stabbing himself in the head, could one really trust his thought process?

“Why didn’t you burn my body?” Daken asked, finally opening his eyes. They were glazed, staring straight ahead. Logan shifted, uncomfortable.

“Son -”

“When you killed me,” Daken clarified softly, as if there was any need to – that damn day emblazoned in Logan’s mind. “You should have burned my body. Then the twins wouldn’t have brought me back to life, and I wouldn’t have been possessed by that thing.” He squinted his eyes shut, again. “I wouldn’t have -” His breath caught.

Logan felt overcome by sadness. He’d seen what had happened outside, what Daken had recalled he’d done under its influence. He’d heard Daken’s broken mutterings as Hank tried to attend to him. ‘Quod sum eris.’ For Logan, it had always meant becoming a weapon, embracing Romulus’ plans for him.

For Daken, it seemed, it had taken on a more visceral meaning. He was… horrified at the thought of becoming like Romulus – turning his training, his abuse upon another child.

“You’re not Romulus,” he assured his son. It was, perhaps, the wrong thing to say.

Daken laughed – in this deranged, quite not there way. “You’d know, wouldn’t you?” he wheezed. “Oh, Logan. You know nothing.”

Logan dragged his chair closer. “Tell me then. I’m here for you -”

“I don’t have to tell you anything.” Daken turned his head away, pressed his cheek against the pillow. “Why didn’t you burn my body, Logan?” His voice broke. He sounded like a little boy and Logan’s heart clenched.

“I wanted to give you a proper burial,” he exhaled, wringing his hands. He recalled what Laura had told him – that Daken had held a Shinto funeral for him. Logan hadn’t even done that, he’d just dumped Daken into a hole and carved a headstone. He’d never known his son, had he? “It was the least I could do -”

“Because you’d killed me?” Daken cut him off, quietly. Logan clenched his hands, overcome by guilt. “That was what I wanted, you know. You can stop beating yourself over it.” Daken turned to watch him – his bright blue eyes finally snapped into focus. Logan jerked, startled.

“Son?” he breathed, stunned. Surely he didn’t mean -

“I made you do it,” Daken murmured. He didn’t register how he was taking Logan apart, or perhaps he didn’t care. “Told you all manners of nonsense, used my pheromones, beat that kid bloody.” He shuddered, his eyes unfocusing for a moment. A grimace formed on his lips. “See? You can blame what I did to Zach on the Death Seed, but Evan was all me, Logan. A monster. There was nothing else you could have done, really. Rabid dogs get to be shot down.”
“You… hit Evan to make me kill you?” Logan whispered, horrified. He felt tears stinging his eyes, threatening to spill. His boy wanted to die. He’d wanted to die for years. And Logan hadn’t noticed.

“I swear to God, if you make this about you again, Logan.” Daken clenched his teeth. “I said it wasn’t your fault. You can rest easier now,” he said almost off-handedly, and oh –

He was reassuring Logan, in some fucked up way. Relieving him of his guilt.

Logan wouldn’t let him. How many times had he taken the easy way out – giving up on his son, taking everything at face value? Thinking it wasn’t worth it?

“Why should I rest easier when my son wants to die?” he choked. He held out a hand – slowly, hesitantly. Daken stared at it, at him, but he said nothing, something fearful and manic and so utterly weary in his gaze. Logan placed a hand on his son’s arm.

Daken made a small sound. “We’ve had this conversation, Logan. There was nothing you could have ever done. Nothing to save. There hasn’t been for a long time.” He shuddered. “He took care of that, you know. Carved me to his liking.”

Romulus. Logan’s chest ached painfully. He should have done better, and sooner. He should have saved his son before these wretched thoughts took root into Daken’s mind – before he started to believe that there was no salvation possible for him.

“Lost my purpose, after… you know.” Daken shrugged, staring ahead – seeing something Logan couldn’t see. “I tried, Logan. I tried so hard. But I was trapped. I realized I’d never be free. And I thought I should just die, then. Indulged Creed, followed his little plan, brought you there where he wanted you. Where I wanted you. I guess I thought it would be poetic justice. You killing me.” He shut his eyes. “I guess that’s what he’d always wanted. His sacrificial lamb, struck on the altar of my utter devotion.” He chuckled. “Pathetic, no?”

Logan fought the lump in his throat. By God, he’d do his son right this time. He’d support him. “You ain’t pathetic,” he choked. “He’s pathetic. Bringin’ you up like a damn weapon… Hurtin’ a child because an adult’s too much work.”

Daken opened his eyes, stared at him. “That’s exactly what I did, Logan.”

“No, it ain’t. You’re nothing like him, son. You felt you had no other choice, with Evan. And with Zach, you weren’t…” He broke off as Daken shuddered and shook his head.

“Quit this nonsense. Don’t make excuses for me. I know what I did,” Daken snarled. “The reason doesn’t mean I get a pass for doing it. Don’t invalidate my personal growth to make me feel better, it won’t work. It will only make me want to stop talking to you.”

“I’m sorry, son.” Logan rubbed at Daken’s arm – his son let him, his jaw clenched. Logan sighed. He didn’t want to estrange Daken. He wanted to help his son, and – it seemed that Daken was letting him. He was talking with Logan… they were talking. “I won’t do it again.”

“You will. All you can ever do,” Daken said, no bitterness in his voice. Just a statement of fact.

“I’m workin’ on it.” Logan bit the inside of his cheek. Hell, he’d die trying. “I have people ready to smack my head real hard if I don’t.”

Daken rolled his eyes. “Is that supposed to make me feel better? That you’d tell my shit to others if I keep talking to you?”
Logan struggled to keep his features blank, not to show his abject relief at hearing Daken mention so casually the future. It meant it wasn’t absolute, his death wish. “Son, I won’t repeat anything you don’t want me to say.”

Daken sighed. “I guess they all know I’m fucked in the head anyway.” He moved his hands experimentally inside the handcuffs, though he didn’t unsheathe his claws. Daken’s phone – one of Jubilee’s, if Logan wasn’t mistaken – chirped from the nightstand, where Logan had put it. Daken shut his eyes.

They lulled into silence. Logan sat awkwardly, his hand still moving over Daken’s arm – Daken had given no indication that he should stop, he hadn’t protested, and it was stupid, but Logan almost felt as if the small gesture was comforting.

He didn’t know what to say. He knew he wanted to say that suicide wasn’t the answer and all would solve but Daken would throw him out if he dared saying something like that... if he belittled Daken’s feelings again. His son obviously felt strongly about all this – about Romulus, about Zach – and Logan wasn’t equipped to make that conversation. Jean, perhaps. Whenever she came back.

Daken stirred. “I shouldn’t have done that,” he murmured. “I shouldn’t have made you kill me.”

Logan stilled. That was a loaded sentence, and he didn’t quite know how to respond. He couldn’t very well say it was all right.

Daken didn’t seem to be waiting for an answer; he turned his head away, speaking quietly. “I was so angry. I couldn’t do anything on my own and you’d taken everything from me, my revenge, my life, my purpose. I was beginning to feel – to realize –” he clenched his teeth. “Things. I was realizing things about myself, about my past. Hating myself.”

He’d said that, as he confronted Logan that day. He had said he hated himself. And Logan had dismissed it, dismissed him. Told him that life was a fucking ‘dance’. How conceited and reductive.

“I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you, son.”

Daken shook his head. “I wasn’t ever going to sit you down and expose myself, Logan. Not back then.” ‘Told you all manners of nonsense,’ he’d said earlier, about that day. But at least the bit about hating himself had been real; he’d just admitted it.

“And now?” Logan bit his tongue as soon as the words left his mouth. Shit, he’d fucked it up –

But Daken didn’t scream bloody murder, he didn’t throw him out. His eyelids fluttered shut and then opened, his gaze fixed on the wall. “... I don’t know.”

“That’s all right.” Logan squeezed his arm. “I don’t want you to tell me anything you don’t want to, son.” He ached to know everything, but his son was a private creature and what he was hiding wasn’t a walk in the park. Just a few days before Logan would have jumped at this opportunity but Betsy had made him see reason.

“That would be a first.” Daken laughed a little. His phone chirped again and he winced. “… He didn’t bring me up,” he breathed.

Logan started. He’d surmised as much, from some things Daken had said to Zach outside, but he hadn’t thought Daken would just tell him...

How much of it was his willingness to talk and how much was it his unwillingness to think about who was texting him?
Logan took a chance. “Romulus?”

Daken shuddered at the name. “Yes. He dropped me on a pair’s doorstep. In Japan. A rural area. I don’t think he was going to show up again if no powers had manifested.” His eyes glazed over, maybe pondering what-should-have-beens. Always a dangerous game, that; Logan would know.

“How long were you with them?” He didn’t ask information about the family; he sensed it had all ended in blood. Daken would tell him later. Maybe. If it didn’t hurt too much.

“Ten years.” Daken shut his eyes. “They were doomed from the moment they laid their eyes on me. She was – it was complicated. But he was a good man.” He exhaled; Logan fought an ugly surge of jealousy. It was good that his son had known love, for a while. “He killed himself rather than shooting me, you see.” Logan stilled, alarmed. “It wouldn’t have made a difference,” Daken continued, grimacing. “I’d have healed. But he chose me.”

“Rather than shooting you?” Logan repeated quietly. Daken opened his eyes, stared right at Logan – through Logan.

“I did bad things, Logan. I told you there was nothing to be saved.”

“That’s not true,” Logan rushed to say. “I know you’re doing good for yourself. Getting better. This thing that’s happening, it’s gonna pass, Daken. We’re going to fight it together, I promise.”

“I can see you believe that.” Daken clenched his teeth. “Afterwards, when they were dead. I was alone and I wouldn’t have survived. Or I thought so, anyway. And he came and he took me in and I thought it was wonderful, that someone would take care of me. But he just wanted to use me. Ring any bells?” He looked at Logan pointedly, daring him to contradict him.

Zach. Of course it all came back to Zach. “I’m sure that wasn’t the same.” He didn’t dare to ask what Romulus’ tutelage had entailed – but he knew Daken couldn’t have done any of that, or Zach would have been far more damaged. “Zach said you fought the Death Seed. And I’m so proud of that, son. Of you. You didn’t give in.”

“I could have!” Daken snarled. “Can’t you see? I have that capacity, in me. He warped me, but I was already a hole. All I do is hurt – God!” he wailed, when his phone chirped again. Logan twitched, eyed it nervously – his hand moving on its own, running soothing circles on Daken’s arm.

“Want me to take a look, son? See who it is?”

“I know who it is.” Daken’s voice broke. “It’s Johnny.”

“Johnny Storm?” Logan said cautiously. He knew that Storm had visited, the other day. He didn’t quite know what was between them, but he guessed Storm was Daken’s friend, just as much as Lorna. He’d certainly looked torn enough when Daken had pulled his stunt, years ago.

“Yes.” Daken seemed to shrink, his gaze sadder than before. He looked away. “Someone must have told him – Rogue. They used to be teammates. I’m going to kill that woman,” he said weakly.

“He’s worried about you, then,” Logan pointed out sensibly. “Want me to answer? Tell him you’re not up to talking?”

“He’ll just worry more.” Daken shut his eyes. “I knew this wasn’t right. I knew it.” He rolled to his side, a small sob escaping his lips. Logan stood up, feeling utterly out of his depth.

“Son?” he said stupidly. Daken shook his head. Thinking now or never, Logan sat down on the bed,
moving his hand to his son’s shoulder. Daken stilled, held his breath. “I know it’s overwhelming, people carin’ about us. But they help, son. It’s a good thing -”

“He shouldn’t worry about me,” Daken gasped. He was crying, silent tears streaking his cheeks. Logan felt touched that Daken would let him see. He’d be worthy of his son’s trust. “I hurt him, and I’ll hurt him again, and I don’t want to -”

“It’s their choice to make,” Logan said. “Yes, worry about it, try your damn best not to. But they have the right to decide when it’s enough, son. They have the right to decide they care about you more than about what you’ll throw at them. They have a right to want to be there for you.”

“Not Johnny.” Daken turned his head against the pillow, muffling his whimpers. “He’s important. He can’t – I can’t hurt him again, I couldn’t bear it -”

Logan got the feeling, suddenly, that they weren’t talking about friendship anymore. Should he draw attention to it? Give his grieving, suicidal son fucking relationship advice?

“I don’t want him to see me like this,” Daken muttered, desperate. “I don’t want to use him to feel better, he doesn’t deserve -”

Ah, fuck it.

“You know, I used to think that too. Thought I’d only hurt whoever cared for me.” Logan hesitated; Daken was shaking his head, but he was listening. “Your momma set me straight. She was a hurricane, she was. She wouldn’t take my shit.” His voice softened. Daken turned his head to look at him, his eyes filled with tears.

“That’s the wrong example, Logan,” he choked. “Mother died because of you. Of us,” he amended, and maybe he did so because Logan had winced, and that in itself spoke volumes to Logan.

“She did,” Logan agreed, his heart clenching painfully. He still remembered her – so beautiful, and iron-willed. “And I’ll never forgive myself for that. But I know what she’d have told you. She’d have told you this is bullshit. She’d have told you to follow your heart.”

Daken didn’t answer, kept sniffling quietly. He was a mess of jumbled thoughts, a ball of hurt, and perhaps this wasn’t the right moment to talk about love. Not until he got himself together. God knew love wasn’t a crutch to hold onto, to pretend it all was fine. But he’d be damned if he didn’t tell his son that there was some hope at the end of the tunnel; that he was worthy of that too.

“Son. It’s going to be all right. We’re going to fix everything, I promise -”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Logan.” Daken cleared his throat, wiped his face on the pillow. He made to sit up and Logan hastened to help him, put the pillow behind his back. The chains holding Daken’s hands to the bed rattled and Daken grimaced. “You can’t fix what I did to Zach.”

Logan sighed. “Son -”

“I heard you the first time. It’s all here.” Daken cocked his head, to show he’d remember. “Now stop talking, please.”

Logan opened his mouth – to tell him what? To keep pushing? To throw away all the progress they’d made? - and closed it.

Daken leant his head against the pillow. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “For this, too.”
Logan cleared his throat. “Anytime, son.”

In the silence that ensued, the phone chirped again. Daken bit his lip, his gaze shifting rapidly, and then he seemed to come to a resolution. “Tell him I’ll call him later. Use your phone. Please.”

So that Logan wouldn’t read the messages, of course. Logan fished his phone out of his pocket and looked for Storm’s number; Hank had put every good guy’s contact information in the brand new phone he’d procured for Logan.

‘Kid’s rattled, but he’s breathing,’ he wrote to Storm. ‘Said he’ll call you later. We’re taking care of him.’ He re-read the message, then wrote ‘Daken’ instead of ‘Kid’ and hit send.

Storm’s response came half a second later. He must have been glued to his phone. ‘Thank you, Logan.’

When he looked up, Daken was staring at him. He seemed more sedated, or perhaps he’d managed to throw it all under the carpet. They sat there – in what Logan hoped he could call companionable silence. It wasn’t over, not by a long mile. His son was horribly hurt, and it would take time to get things right. But this… this right here… had been a first step. Logan was grateful for it.

Daken even relaxed minutely, his body losing some of that tightness. And Logan hoped.

It was at that point that a soft knock came. They both straightened up as the door gently opened and Jean’s scent hit their nostrils. Daken made to move, but he couldn’t, and he cursed. Logan turned, seeing her at the doorway through the glass.

“May I come in?” she called out. Logan nodded, watched her make her way towards them with some trepidation. She’d washed thoroughly and changed from her costume, he noticed; a thoughtful gesture Logan loved her for. She entered the secure chamber and gave them both a small smile.

“How are you, Daken?” she said pleasantly.

Daken stared at her. “You wasted time showering?” His voice was tinged with incredulity, but Logan smelt he was touched.

“You were talking. I didn’t want to interrupt.” Jean crossed her arms.

“You didn’t want to – What you have to say is more important!” Daken spluttered. Logan had to agree, at least on some level. Especially with the way her findings would send Daken on edge.

Jean leaned against the wall. “I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner, Daken. But I wanted to be absolutely sure that what I’m about to tell you was true.” Daken visibly braced himself. “Romulus isn’t involved,” Jean said softly. “And we’re closing in on Roston.”

Daken exhaled a shuddering breath. He deflated completely, melting against the mattress – his features crumbled; he didn’t dare to hope. “Are you sure -?”

“A hundred percent.” Jean smiled. “And we improved security on Romulus. He won’t leave for a long, long time.”

Daken let out a breathy, exhilarated, utterly free small laughter that had Logan’s heart swell with relief. His son would be all right. Jean was here now, and his son would be all right.

Daken regained some composure. “Are you going to help me now?”

Jean cocked her head. “I think you need to rest. I understand it was a straining day for you.” She
held up a hand, sensing Daken’s oncoming protest. Logan himself had been about to speak. “But, if you feel up to it, we can start with something simple.”

“Yes, please,” Daken said quickly. “Please. I don’t want to feel like this anymore.”

“I know, Daken.” Jean’s eyes were full of understanding. “Logan, if you will -”

“Oh! Sure. Sorry.” Logan got up. He looked upon his son – his strong, strong son – and felt his chest ache with all he hadn’t said yet, all he’d managed to.

There would be time for that now. There was hope.

He left.

Outside, there was a small group of people. He went for his partners first, almost shaking with relief; lost himself in ‘Ro’s comforting scent and Kurt’s strong arms around him. When he thought he could face Laura, he turned in their embrace to meet her gaze.

She was pale, his daughter. Still so shocked by what had happened. Beside her, Jubilee squeezed her hand; sitting at her feet, Gabby’s little face was crunched up with worry.

“He’ll get better,” Logan said – knowing it was true. Laura nodded.

“You… talked,” she said slowly. Logan felt a smile split his face. Yeah. They’d talked. And it had been good. He thought he’d made some difference. He thought he’d helped Daken, even if a little. Laura cocked her head. “Did you apologize?”

Logan’s face fell. He hadn’t told Daken about their misunderstanding. But he’d do it soon. He wanted to build some foundations first. And the fact that Daken had listened to him despite what he believed Logan to have done –

“I wanted to apologize,” Laura said. “To you.” Logan furrowed his brow. “It wasn’t right, what you did, but you did it to protect him. I –” She hung her head. “It was sanctimonious of me to think so lowly of you.”

“Oh, darlin’, no.” Logan extricated himself from his partners’ embrace, took a step towards her. She smelt awfully contrite. “You were right. It was wrong.” It was also not true, but this wasn’t the time for that.

Laura inhaled sharply. “Yes, you’re right. It was wrong. For me, too.” She turned on her heels and fled – Jubilee stumbling after her. Logan stared at their retreating figures, wondering what he’d done wrong now. Gabby gave him an unimpressed glance and then run after her sister too.

Betsy, who was standing just a few feet apart from the group, sighed. You’re getting the hang of this, Logan. I promise, she projected into his mind.

He turned to watch her. She’d showered, too. You think?

Oh, yes. She cocked her head. That was good, what you did in there.

You were listening? he asked, horrified. Daken wouldn’t like that.

Only at the end. It was good, she repeated, flashing him a reassuring smile. Then she sobered. Listen, we wanted to tell you. Romulus had no idea what we were talking about, he thought Roston was a ridiculous ant. But he did fight back, when Jean dug deep. She shuddered; Logan dreaded to think
about what they’d found in the monster’s mind. Perhaps that was another reason why they’d both showered, other than to spare Daken Romulus’ scent. *Logan, he managed to see Daken in Jean’s mind,* Betsy said slowly. *He was… delighted by the damage. And disgusting.*

Logan saw red. He didn’t know what to expect, what Romulus could have even *said,* and he wasn’t going to ask. But his son was coming apart at the seams because of *him,* and it didn’t take a great deal of imagination to understand it had been fucking *bad.*

*Yeah,* Betsy said. *But I left him a gift,* she said viciously, and he’d never seen her so angry, and he’d seen her *very* angry. *I put triggers in his mind. He’ll get lovely little shocks every time he turns his ugly mind towards your son.*

Logan stared. She was almost shaking with righteous fury and she was *magnificent.*

*Thank you,* he managed to say – for Daken’s sake too. He doubted he’d be in the right state of mind to hear of this anytime soon… but he’d be, eventually.

And he’d know that he was surrounded by people who’d taken to him. They hadn’t killed Romulus for him – but this was almost better.

Or at least, Logan knew that he’d sleep easier knowing that the monster couldn’t even think about Daken anymore without getting *hurt.*

Talk about comeuppance.

Chapter End Notes

*Next:* Daken remembers something.

[This family is killing me. I have many thoughts about Remender’s arc, mainly the fact that that man can’t write Daken for the life of him… and so I’ve always believed that Daken was sprouting nonsense to the purpose of making Logan kill him. How else do you drown someone in a mere *puddle?* Only if that person is more than willing. This was another packed chapter! Let me know what you think, I love your comments! ^.^ I love to hear when you especially like a scene or the other, this is a labor of love ^-^ ]
Daken remembers something.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay! My laptop died but fortunately I managed to save it. I lost everything though, so I had to rewrite this chapter… I find it a bit lacking, but I kept you waiting long enough!

The update schedule is going to change a bit due to real life! I don’t have a clear idea, for now I’ll try to update once a month and we’ll see how it goes.

Additional Warnings: suicidal thoughts, mentions of child abuse and child murder.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

31.

“Is there anything you want to talk about? Anything on your mind?” Jean Grey said gently.

She was sitting on the plastic chair beside his bed – the one Logan had sat upon while they talked.

The whole experience had been surreal, and Daken had wanted to strangle Logan a couple of times, especially when he’d mentioned Daken’s mother… but it was just muscle memory, what he’d been supposed to do for so long. In truth, some strange measure of relief had flooded his body while they picked at festering wounds; Logan had truly put in some effort, and Daken hadn’t been drained by the conversation. It had been strange and terrifying but not utterly unwelcome -

But the prospect of talking again sent his teeth on edge. He felt he’d talked enough for a lifetime. And what could he say, anyway? That he’d been right about himself? That the self-loathing had come back with a vengeance?

“I thought you’d get into my mind.” He settled for something neutral. That prospect worried him even more. But he’d asked her and he knew he needed it; he had to get rid of the void. He had to get rid of Romulus.

So maybe the monster wasn’t involved with what was happening, or so Grey said. That was a relief: there was just Roston to take care of, and he wouldn’t survive the full might of the X-Men.

But Romulus was still there – at the edges of Daken’s mind, leering. Tormenting him with a fundamental truth.

“In due time.” Grey cocked her head. “Your mind’s very complex, Daken, and you’re extremely upset right now. I don’t want to trigger anything.” She pointedly didn’t look at his encased hands, but he knew she was referring to that too. He wondered if she’d been briefed, or if she’d witnessed his attempted suicide through someone’s memories.

He’d tried to kill himself.

In front of Zach.
Fuck, Zach must be traumatized right now – not that he wasn’t already, thanks to fucking Daken. Daken should have done it somewhere else – somewhere more secluded. He should have made sure no one could treat him afterwards…

“Where are you right now?” Grey said lightly, but her body was very much alert, tense. She must be sensing something.

Where was he? Staring down a fucking pit of despair, again. Thinking about where to hide in order to make his death stick. And he was so fucking tired of this. Of the void governing his mood. Of the fear and the pain and the absolute certainty that there was a bundle of rot at his very core – one that Romulus and the fucking Death Seed had just nurtured. Like disgusting weed, a wretched disease.

He looked upon Jean Grey – this force of nature, this hell of a woman who’d just taken a look at the darkest depths of his mind and decided he was worth salvation. At this point, he didn’t even care if he was her pet project.

“I tried to kill myself,” he acknowledged. He hadn’t truly said it out loud, not until now. Not even as he discussed with Logan another moment when he’d sought death as the answer. He’d danced around it, yes – but he hadn’t actually said the words.

Grey leaned towards him, just a bit; a look of utmost attention on her features. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”

He wasn’t… sure, himself. Zach had been there and Daken had been battling the self-hatred, the worry. He’d seen himself in Zach, starkly: this poor boy he’d wronged, who was doing his best to defend Daken’s actions, to explain them; who looked up to Daken as a savior.

‘You never even touched me!’ Zach had said, and then…

Then, memories had flooded Daken. He’d thought he remembered everything that had happened under the influence of the Death Seed but evidently he didn’t, because there they were, sharp and unforgiving, images he must have just fucking repressed. Harsh shoves, the occasional kick in Zach’s behind. Nothing horrific, nothing on the monster’s level, but nausea had taken him again. What if this still wasn’t everything? What if someday he recalled something else and discovered he’d done something worse, something unforgivable? What he already knew he’d done was unforgivable enough but what if there was more? Zach’s panicked reassurances did nothing to assuage his fears because, simply, Zach couldn’t be trusted to be objective. Just as Daken had lied to himself for literal decades.

He’d lost it. He couldn’t live with himself, he knew he couldn’t fucking live with himself and the knowledge he’d hurt a kid just as he’d been hurt; he couldn’t live with turning into Romulus. He’d rather die.

So he’d tried to. Simple as that.

Not so simple, no. “I panicked,” he said, knowing how reductive that was. “I started remembering I hit Zach. How could I just remember now -?” he threw, as an aside, though he suspected the answer.

“Trauma,” Grey said immediately. “It was to be expected, really. You’ve been through trauma after trauma and it’s only natural your mind would try to protect you from something that was bound to trigger such a reaction.”

That was what he’d thought, yes. Though it unnerved him that she made that connection: that recalling such a thing would drive him to self-harm. But she’d been in his mind, hadn’t she? And –
he shuddered – in Romulus’.

What had she seen there? He tried to discern if there was any pity in her gaze, but she was nothing if not professional, the picture of quiet concern. It filled him with unease to wonder whether she’d witnessed all the ways he’d been broken…

But no. This wasn’t – couldn’t – be about Daken, not right now. “How’s -” His voice cracked, he cleared his throat. “How’s Zach?” He didn’t have the right to ask, but still.

“Rattled,” Grey said softly. “He cares about you.”

“He shouldn’t.” The words felt familiar, by now. He knew they were true. “I hurt him.”

“Yes,” she agreed.

“I hit him.”

“You did.” She nodded, cocked her head.

“If you say it wasn’t me -” He gritted his teeth. It hadn’t been him, but it had still been his body. His goddamn mind – warped, but how much? How much of it had it been the Seed, how much had it been him?

“It wasn’t you.” Grey looked at him serenely. “Daken, I’ve seen many friends be possessed by malicious forces. I have been, too. It’s normal, healthy even, that you question how many of the actions you took under its influence were driven by – let’s say, pre-existing urges. But try to remember that such outside forces warp one’s own perception. And your reaction to these memories tells you that this is not who you are.”

“I would never take in a child,” he felt compelled to say, bile rushing up his throat. “I’d never -” he broke off. What was he going to say? That he would never ‘hurt’ a child? As a child himself, Daken had thrown into the river his little half-brother, a mere infant, so that he wouldn’t take Daken’s place; and he’d had to kill children over the years under Romulus’ thumb, because there wasn’t any choice when he was given a mission.

In more recent times, he’d hit that boy, Evan: a full-on, methodical beating, to drive Logan to believe he was beyond salvation, to persuade Logan to kill Daken. He’d been a right mess at the time, that decision had been brought about by sheer desperation – but that had been him. Daken, with no ‘outside force’.

So the point was moot. It was him. It was something he could do. Something he had the capacity for thinking and acting on, on his own. That, and worse.

“Finish that sentence,” Grey said gently. He shook his head.

“That’s not true,” he choked. “It’s all a lie, Grey. I would; I have. I have that void, within me. It’s not an outside force, it’s me.”

“What is?” Grey questioned. “What is it, that’s inside you? This void.”

He let out a sharp, hysterical laughter. Wasn’t it obvious? She ought to know. She’d seen his mind. Hadn’t she sensed the rot?
“You’ve hurt children,” Grey said lightly. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes.” He averted his gaze, suddenly weary beyond belief. What was the point of this? He’d thought she’d help him. He’d thought she’d rid him of Romulus, of himself, of this damn hole in his chest. She should just get on with it and wipe Daken away.

“How?” she asked, and he had to turn his head sharply to stare at her because what sick kind of question was that? But she looked calmly on, quietly focused on him. “How have you hurt children, Daken?”

“Zach -” he choked on the name, his tongue lead in his mouth.

“That wasn’t you. Before.” She held up a hand, palm up. “Tell me about before.”

Before. Before was before that long edge of darkness, before the death that had stuck and the return that had corrupted him. Before was before the horrific crevices of hell he knew he’d turn to when he died again – when he really, truly died. Before was on him, and him alone.

He’d smelt the kid just stand there and watch as Logan drowned him in the puddle. It must have been a relief to witness Daken’s demise, after what Daken had done to him.

“You must know about Evan Sabahnur,” he muttered. “The little Apocalypse clone.”

She cocked her head. “And what did you do to him?”

“I beat him.” Daken clenched his teeth. He hadn’t particularly liked it, but he’d still done it. Because it was the fastest way to gain Logan’s attention, to rile him up. To show him what an animal Daken was, so that he’d put Daken down. “I beat him to a pulp on the floor.”

A flicker of something in Grey’s eyes; at last, she showed some emotion over his wrongdoings. But the next moment she was the picture of composure again. “And before? Other children?”

Other children. He’d never sought out kids as targets. While he was under Romulus, some missions had entailed killing children too and he’d done it, of course. What else could he have done? Romulus always knew. He’d been quick and efficient but that was hardly a good thing – he’d still done it. He doubted Grey wanted to hear that and he had no intention of making excuses.

“I’ve killed children in the past. Jobs.” This time, Grey definitely showed signs of distress, inhaling sharply before, again, regaining her composure and exhaling slowly before taking a deep breath.

“Did you draw out their deaths? Hit them, perhaps?” she asked. He shuddered; while he’d occasionally enjoyed prolonging a job on adults, he’d never done that with kids.

“No.” Of course not.

She hummed. “Why?”

He clenched his teeth. What was the point of this? What was she trying to prove? “They were already going to die. There was no reason to make them suffer on top of that.”

She raised an eyebrow, as if to say ‘See?’ It made him nauseous.

“Grey, I still killed them.”

“Believe me, I know.” She shivered. “But I’m trying to make you see something here.”
“What?” What could she possibly want him to see? That it had been wrong? Oh, he knew that well.

She leaned towards him. “You didn’t make it worse than it could have been,” she said slowly. “The children you killed, you had to. I understand that, by job, you mean mercenary hits you did for -” she paused, “- Romulus.”

His stomach churned. “Yes.”

“And you had no other choice but to obey.”

He shook his head. “Grey, I’m hardly a saint -”

“You’re a murderer. I know. You’ve killed people even after Romulus was out of your life...” He barked a sharp laughter that tasted of his own blood, so hard he’d bit down on his tongue. Romulus had never been ‘out of his life’. And he’d killed before Romulus. Grey worried her lower lip. “I’m sorry. I mean, I know you are a killer, Daken. But that doesn’t change the fact that you weren’t working for him out of your free will. If he gave you a job, you obeyed, and that was it. Is that correct?”

Her eyes flickered. She’d been in Daken’s mind – in Romulus’. She knew. She knew Romulus’ punishments. She knew Romulus’ sway –

He hung his head to avoid her gaze. “Yes.”

“And you did what you had to do,” she said softly. “Nothing more. You didn’t torture those kids. A monster would have done that, but you didn’t.” A pregnant pause. “And it might have escaped everyone’s attention after how the situation had ended... but Betsy was kind enough to allow me to watch what happened with Evan, Daken. And I did notice how remarkably unbothered by the beating he was.”

Daken stilled. That didn’t matter; he’d still beaten the boy. The boy had still bled.

“You hit nonvitals,” Grey said matter-of-factly. “It was a show for Logan’s benefit. You did the less damage you could do to achieve your goal, nothing more.”

“So what,” he snapped, fed up with her almost maternal tone, with her downplaying. “It’s all good? It doesn’t matter?”

“So, you don’t enjoy harming children. You never did.” She moved then – she leaned closer, placed a hand on the bed. She didn’t touch him, but her pale hand rested inches from his encased left one. He stared at it, unable to meet her eyes. She was insane. “That is who you are. A foundation so strong of your sense of self, that it battled the Death Seed -”

“No, I -”

“While under its influence,” she interrupted him, her voice soft as if explaining something to a child, “you held no qualms over beating Logan. I spoke with Rogue too, and the battle with the Avengers was horrifying. You didn’t hold back in any fight, you just acted. A part of it was you, of course – your rage, your desires. But the rest was the Death Seed. It fed on you, and sent you spiraling. Afterwards, when you were out of the twins’ grasp, you sensed that. You were already strong enough to seek a way to control it, lest it controlled you. You could feel yourself slipping -”

“Yes,” he interjected, his voice cracking. That was how it had felt, what he recalled to have felt. He was being eaten alive, swallowed whole by the void. He was losing all he was – all the progress he’d made after Logan’s death.
Logan’s death had hit him like a stone smashing a skull. He’d felt sedated, lethargic. He’d followed meekly Mystique’s orders, Laura’s presence on the shapeshifter’s plane an anchor he clung to. He’d been useless at the time, and the Death Seed had known it; it had lay dormant, biding its time.

But when the worlds had collided and the world had changed and he’d woken up one day, his healing factor returned – the Death Seed had acted out, again. He’d felt it reaching out, slick tendrils of nothingness crawling under his skin, inside his skull. Meditation didn’t work and talking with Laura didn’t work and he’d hid away –

No, that wasn’t right –

“Every time you felt you were about to harm Zach, to really harm him, you distanced yourself from him,” Grey was murmuring, as if from far, far away… He wanted to interrupt her, to protest it wasn’t true, but he was unraveling, felt something stir at the edge of his mind. “Because that is where you draw the line, where you always have. Even when you were mind-controlled by that chemical,” she said softly, her hand slithering up, up, up. He felt her touch the metal surrounding his hand as if it was touching his flesh. “Harming a child was one of the things that set you off. A trigger that awakened you, made you panic.” His elbow colliding with a nose, a whiff of blood.

Gabby. He heard his breath hitch and shred itself in quick puffs.

Grey hesitated. “Daken?”

No. “Help,” he choked out. He was being strangled, his little feet kicking the air. Quod sum eris. Something, something was at the back of his mind, like when he’d recalled what he’d done to Zach. “Grey.”

“I’m here.” She touched his arm, the warmth reeling him in just barely. “I’ll attempt to slide into your mind. Are you okay with that?”

“Tasukete!” Help me! He was remembering something. It was there and it scared him and the void, the fucking void –

I’m here. Grey’s voice echoed in his mind. She held him, held his shivering panicked self. It was dark. It was cold. Let it come to you and remember what I told you.

What she’d told him? He was suffocating, he was trapped and she’d just come into his mind with no defense, no preparation – Xavier had been knocked unconscious! How could she help him if she was hurt the same way, and what was she blabbering about -

I’m not Charles, she said, something shimmering around them. It was dark and cold and then it wasn’t, and he could breathe, he could breathe. Watch, but understand what you’re seeing. Remember what I told you.

She knew what he was about to remember?

I sensed it awakening. It was screaming. She held him tightly as he opened his eyes.

[He was in Laura’s apartment. The day she’d invited him over. They’d danced around each other for weeks, he’d shown her Logan’s memorial, but she’d had yet to invite him home. Until she had. And there was a scent twin to hers, and he was staring at this miniature copy of Laura. Laura had been cloned, and she’d decided to take the girl in. The girl was smart and funny and it stirred something in his chest. He wanted to protect her. She was just a child and she’d been used all her life, just like Laura, just like him, but she didn’t let that bring her down. She was bright and so cheerful and he wanted her to never be used again.]
And the Seed wanted to use her. The Seed was screaming, *screaming*, that she ought to be used. That she ought to be trained properly. That *that* was what he’d been raised to do, to pass down the wisdom of millennia, to create an army to take on the world with, to lay waste to everything and everyone, Death to all, a void to swallow the world whole –]

No. No! He recoiled and Grey was there, holding him even as he struggled. Shrapnel came at them, a cacophony of sounds, high-pitched screaming, but Grey deviated it all. He could sense it was his defenses, it was his own mind in a desperate attempt to flee and deflect, but she parried every hit with practiced ease, sliding them both through the chaos.

Then, it quietened down. They were in a small pocket of darkness but it was silent, faintly illuminated by a candle.

She sat them down. He let her, dazed, horrified, stupefied.

He’d contemplated training Gabby. He’d contemplated *harming* her –

*The Seed did*. Grey took his hands. *The Seed fed on what was done to you, on your trauma, and concocted a dark design. And that’s when you snapped, Daken. That’s when you found the strength to decide you had to control it, to counterattack. That’s when you sought out Zach’s help.*

When he’d sought to destroy Zach, too, rather. He wasn’t safe. He wasn’t *safe*, he had to tell Laura –

*Daken*. Grey put a hand on his heart. *Stop thinking. Watch.*

[He gritted his teeth, excused himself. Laura didn’t comment because he’d told her already he sometimes felt the Seed’s pull. He fluffed Gabby’s hair and bid them goodbye and exited Laura’s apartment, the building, got into his car. *It* was straining, tearing at him, howling, but he held it down, his knuckles white with effort, beads of sweat on his body, blue patches where his skin was visible. His eyes in the rearview mirror were splotches of red, then normal again, then red swallowed the iris and then vanished, back and forth, back and forth. But he’d held on. He smelt rotten, like a dead thing, but he’d held on. He’d sought out his most secluded safe-house and once he was inside he’d stuck all his claws in his legs and he’d dragged them up and down until the searing hot pain was all he was and the void had receded.]

*Watch.*

[He’d stopped answering Laura’s texts and calls, stabbing himself every time he felt his fingers itch. When he was lucid he considered going to the X-Men, but they’d never help. No one would even listen because they knew what he was, and he wouldn’t risk involving Laura. He stalked at the edges of the school, pondering if they’d take him down if he just attacked them and then maybe they’d sense that something was *wrong* with him and then perhaps they’d wrench *it* away from him? He drew out all he’d discovered when he researched the Apocalypse Seed before Logan’s death, the available info on all the X-Men who’d been possessed over the years. And then one day he heard the boy talk in Hyde Park, loud and boasting. The boy was a walking on-off switch for mutant powers. The boy was the solution.]

He remembered what had happened next. He’d concocted a mad plan. Kept tabs on Zach and moved in as soon as the boy, eager to prove himself, had hit the streets and got himself into trouble the first night. Took Zach in, used him to try and free himself – one way or another. At the end he’d lost all control, the Seed overpowering him. But he’d *tried*.

And he’d done all that… he’d done it to regain control. To protect – to *protect* –
Lights swirled around them. Shadows formed, then buildings, and he recognized Rome’s streets. He recognized the path, his aimless wandering as he pondered what to do with his life. It had happened long years ago, after his reckoning, after Romulus’ supposed ‘death’.

The pickpocket.

He watched himself as he stopped the small Italian girl that had tried to steal from him, as he gave her advice to survive the streets a little longer, to delay the inevitable. The girl begged him to take her in and he chased her away because he would never, he would never –

He would never take in a child. He would never harm a child. He would never submit a child to the nightmare that had taken him.

That’s what I wanted you to see. Grey retreated, pulling him with her, taking them both out of his mind. He found himself on the bed, her hand on his arm as she sat beside him. He was shaking; she gazed down at him with concern. “I didn’t mean to trigger another Death Seed memory,” she murmured. “I apologize.”

“It’s all right,” he tried to say. It was more of a mumbling, his teeth clattering with shock. It was just as well, no? It had served her purpose. Proved her point. “Did – did you know -?”

“No.” She shook her head. “But from your responses, it was likely that perceiving a threat to children was what made you fight the Death Seed.”

A threat to children. Daken shuddered, recalling that void. Romulus’ voice, a leer on his face –

“You fought it,” she said firmly, “and won.” Her hand moved slowly over his harm. “You defeated the void on your own. I’ll help you eradicate it but, Daken, I need you to know you’re strong enough. I need you to trust yourself.” She caught his encased hands and he felt warmth seeping through. His hands unclenched; his claws slid back into his arms. He hadn’t even noticed he’d unsheathed them, but he guessed it had happened while he was in his mind, while he remembered…

Gabby. He’d fought the Death Seed for Gabby.

For himself. For Zach.

It didn’t change the damage he’d done to the boy. He’d done it – the Death Seed had done it – and Zach would need time to heal. But Daken had fought. He’d always fought.

He wasn’t rotten. He had never spread the disease – he would never.

He was strong enough to fight. To scream in the face of Romulus’ abuse and say: no. not me. Not ever. How had Laura put it -?

He was a survivor. He thought he finally understood what she’d meant.

He thought he could finally start to believe it.

Chapter End Notes
Next: A reconciliation.

[This is a bit of a point of contention in the Daken fandom; it’s usually argued that he doesn’t harm children, that he draws the line at that. We do have textual proof – the aforementioned Italian girl comes to mind – that he relates heavily to abused children and he’d probably go out of his way not to hurt them. But I also think that it could be a bit disingenuous to believe he never killed one, apart from those we know about and know the extenuating circumstances around those instances. He spent fifty years under Romulus’ thumb and I find it hard to believe that he was never given the order to terminate an entire family, or something along those lines. Daken’s first on-panel interaction with Gabby always struck me as strange for a first meeting, so I’ve always believed that Laura must have introduced them earlier. This, once the timeline for his most recent appearances revealed itself, also meant that Daken must still have been under the influence of the Death Seed at the time. Let me know what you think, your comments make my day! ^_^ ]
A reconciliation.

I’m back! So terribly sorry for the delay, my schedule’s all over the place. Real life’s pretty hectic.

For my peace of mind (and yours) I’m not going to set up an update schedule, which could be easily disrupted, as we’ve seen. Updates are going to keep coming, though, rest assured! ^-^

Additional Warnings: suicide mention, mentions of child abuse.

“Can I come in?” Laura murmured, a hand on the jamb.

Daken, who’d just got off the phone, raised his head from the pillow to study her. She stood in the doorway to his room in the med bay; she’d waited in the larger room for a few minutes, having arrived in the midst of his conversation with, it seemed, Johnny Storm. She’d almost turned on her heels then, but then he’d glanced up and seen her through the glass and motioned for her to wait, so he wasn’t averse to talking to her. Not yet, at least.

She’d just managed to get a hold of her own emotions, thanks to Jubilee’s firm comfort, and she’d known she had to come down here and face Daken sooner rather than later, to clear the air before it was too late. To apologize.

She’d never been this side of the barricade, with Daken. She’d never hurt him so that he’d look at her as he had earlier that day, on the lawn. But she knew how fiercely he could hold a grudge, and she feared she’d just gone and burnt their bridge. So careless.

She was such a hypocrite. So tall and proud on her high horse – and the fact that it had taken Logan to make her see it, was so much worse.

She knew how Daken felt about being lied to. She knew the toll it took on him, what he was reminded of. No one’s happy at discovering something like that but with Daken, it was worse. He’d been lied to his whole life.

She’d seen how upset he’d been after discovering Logan's lies, although his shock had, too, another and more visceral reason.

And she’d gone and done the exact same thing to him. Not on purpose, not really; it had slipped her mind. But that was much worse. Some sister she was!

And now he lay in a hospital bed again, and this time he’d done it to himself. And she knew he was upset with her too, and he had the right to be, and she didn’t know if her presence could help or make more damage – but as Jubilee as pointed out, he was her family. He needed her. She had to show
him she was there, at least; she’d respect what he decided to do with that.

At least he was being helped. Jean would work with him – and it seemed that he was mending something with Logan. Coming out of the med bay shell-shocked and yet radiating happiness, their father had said he hadn’t apologized to Daken; but he looked like he’d do it soon, and if Daken had decided to listen to him anyway, to talk to him… that was good. That was progress, and she was glad of it.

Looking at Daken now, buried under blankets but already devoid of the padded manacles she knew Hank had used to protect him were he to try anything again, she thought that he looked better than what she’d expected after seeing him so pale and bloodied and desperate on the school’s lawn. There was a clarity to his eyes that she hadn’t thought she’d see; and there had been a softness to his features as he talked to Storm, gently cradling the phone between head and shoulder as his fingers painted lazy lines on the linen.

Could it be that Jean had already worked some miracle?

Daken cocked his head. “Of course, sister.”

Sister. She went, relieved… but she didn’t take the plastic chair he was gesturing at, electing to stand at his side. He adjusted his position, grumbling that they’d all insisted on some bed rest yet again; then a shadow passed over his face, maybe shame or resignation, and he grimaced. He bent his head, letting it rest upon the raised pillow, and looked up at her.

There was no visible sign on the tender flesh below his chin, nor at the top of his skull. Sometimes she hated their healing factor, the way it erased the evidence of their self-harm. She’d had found help far before Cessily found her in that bathroom, maybe, if her arms had scarred normally. Or more probably, she’d have never been born, quelled in Sarah Kinney’s womb as soon as tests showed no healing factor; or perhaps she’d have been murdered on the operating table –

He saw her looking, and he sighed. “I’m sorry. That must have been difficult to watch.”

Startled, she took a step towards him. It had been horrible, yes, gut-wrenching; and it had made her feel so helpless, standing there as he stabbed himself, too far to do anything to stop him. But this wasn’t about her.

“I’m just glad you’re fine,” she hastened to say. She couldn’t help the once-over she gave him as she spoke, to reassure herself despite having already studied him from the door. He did look fine, physically; as for his psyche… there was some peace of mind in the depths of his eyes, a truth gained and treasured that gave him an uncharacteristic aura of something like wonder. Bless Jean, indeed.

He seemed to know her train of thought. “Grey’s good,” he said quietly. She wondered what Jean had done, what they’d talked about – but she’d have to regain his trust first.

She opened her mouth, her apology ready on her tongue.

“You were right,” he murmured. She trailed off, unsure of his meaning. He was looking up at her with such stark gratitude that it hurt her, knowing how she’d let him down. And yet, that lucidity in his eyes, that vision… it was such a different, welcome sight.

“About?” she asked him, softly, when he didn’t elaborate.

He caught her hand. “I’m a survivor,” he said, so simply. So matter-of-fact that it took her a few seconds to catch on, her breath stuttering. Her chest clenched as she recalled so many of their
conversations; she recalled when she’d finally told him exactly that, just a few days before. She recalled how he’d seemed to truly not understand it.

But now… now he believed it, she could see it in his eyes. Now he knew it.

She squeezed his hand, battling the tears – happy tears – threatening to spill. “You are.” It was all she could push past the lump in her throat. She felt so relieved, so grateful, so happy. “And I’m so proud of you.”

Daken held her hand tightly. “I fought back.”

“You did.” She smiled, mesmerized by his beautiful self-affirmation, postponing perhaps what she’d come to do, but… this merited its time, the time to properly appreciate it. Daken deserved it.

There was a sort of fever in his gaze, but not too alarming. It was the sharp knowledge that came with self-discovery, with acceptance. It warmed her heart to see that he’d found this truth within himself.

“I fought,” he repeated. She was nodding, supportive, elated, when he added: “For Gabby, too.” He took a shaky breath.

Laura paused, waiting. It seemed to be something he needed to say, if the sharp change in his heartbeat was to be an indication. It wasn’t panic, not quite: he was still serene, focused. “Go on,” she encouraged him softly.

He shook his head, not in denial but as a sort of centering gesture. “Grey made me remember. The Seed wanted me to… to use Gabby, to train her.” He shut his eyes in plain disgust, then reopened them immediately, searching her gaze, as if to reassure her he’d have never harmed Gabby; when she knew that already. God, she knew: she’d seen it often enough to know it. She squeezed his hand to reassure him, no words necessary, and he released a breath he didn’t seem to realize he’d been holding. “She said that’s what made me snap,” he continued, voice quiet. “Everything I did, after, what I did to Zach…” He shuddered. “I was trying to regain control, because I couldn’t hurt Gabby. I didn’t want to. I couldn’t – I couldn’t replicate my own ab-abuse.”

He stuttered to a halt. He looked startled – wide-eyed – but at peace.

He’d never uttered that word. Never with her; nor, she suspected, with anyone. With Jean, perhaps? No, this was fresh, his surprise evident. Not at the word, or the concept… but at saying it. At saying it out loud.

Her chest ached. “And you didn’t,” she murmured, as she’d told him so many times ever since finding him in that safe-house. She didn’t know if that could reach him, yet; if he could recognize that he hadn’t succumbed. But this knowledge of the nature of what he’d lived through, finally; the verbalization of it, naming it abuse. The exact nature of it he’d discuss with Jean, when he felt ready; Laura wouldn’t expect him to open himself up to her soon, for these things took time, as she well knew, and though they often talked, it was what he didn’t say that told her what he still verbally couldn’t. But this, this was progress: so much, and in so little time!

“Yes,” he exhaled. “I didn’t.” He gritted his teeth then, the muscles of his hand jumping against her skin; and after, a sigh of resignation, releasing the tension as he worked through another truth: “I protected Zach. As best as I could.” He raised his free hand to rub at his eyes. “It wasn’t nearly enough, but I did. What I would have done to him if I hadn’t fought the Death Seed…” He shuddered.
So he knew.

He understood; that was extraordinary. After months of her attempts to get through to him, after seeing his shattered mindscape as she and the telepaths tried to put him back together, she knew this was a wound that run deep, festering exactly because it had cut through a never-healed scab with surgical precision. Worse, it had fed on it, enlarged it to almost consume him.

She had always known it would take time for him to understand that he had done all he could, that he’d fought viciously, that he’d won.

And now he did.

Laura raised her free hand to cover Daken’s, still plastered over his face. He lowered it then, his gaze clear. “He’ll heal,” he said with deadly certainty. Maybe it was a prayer, too.

It might as well have been an assist for what she’d come here to do. She straightened up, a hand resting limply at her side, the other still holding on to Daken’s. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the power dampener.”

He inhaled and looked up at her. There wasn’t accusation in his gaze, that sharp betrayal that had knocked the wind out of her on the lawn. “Were you trying to protect me?” he said softly. It was a way out he was offering: what he would have hated and resented from Logan was something he was willing to take from Laura. Because he trusted her, implicitly.

No lies, though. Not between them. “At first, yes. I didn’t… believe you could cope with it,” she explained. He listened, nodding to himself. “When you came here, though, when you were yourself again… I should have told you. You were bound to notice it sooner or later, and to cope even worse…” She trailed off; they both knew how badly he’d coped. Just because there was no scar it didn’t mean he hadn’t tried to kill himself. “I should have told you,” she repeated. “It… slipped my mind. I’m really sorry.”

His features softened and he shook his head. “You had enough on your plate, I think. You couldn’t be expected to remember that too.” He squeezed her hand.

Her chest clenched. “Daken -”

“It’s all right, Laura.” He sat up, suddenly, and pulled her into an embrace. She was taken aback; it wasn’t the norm, for them. Moments of tactile comfort were few, scarce. None of them had been raised to seek that warmth. Gabby had been the one to introduce them both to it, oftentimes initiating what they were still too fundamentally scarred to think about on their own.

This hug reminded her of when he’d come to her on Roosevelt Island: the startling, overwhelming realization that she wasn’t alone either. That she didn’t have to do everything on her own. She was still learning that. It was an ongoing thing.

She held him back, tightly. His arms were strong and sure, his scent exuding gentle understanding. “You’ve been helping me tirelessly ever since I came back,” he murmured. “To your own detriment. You’ve been taking care of me, sister. It doesn’t matter if this thing slipped your mind.” She exhaled, caught between grief and relief. “It’s going to be all right.”

And there was a world of meaning to those words. It was a reassurance to her, yes, but it was a statement, too. A certainty that he’d lacked for so long that now it took the wind out of her.

It would be all right. Because they were together, and they were a family.
And healing would finally be found.

Chapter End Notes

Next: An unsettling meeting.

[The siblings’ small misunderstanding over Zach’s power dampener was always going to be a minor setback at best – they know they can trust each other – but it had to be tackled nonetheless, especially on Laura’s end. And I wanted the first time Daken really acknowledged his abuse to be a quiet moment with his sister.
Let me know what you think, your comments make my day! ^_^ ]
Things got quiet for a while.

Daken left the med bay after a few days: Jean assured everyone that he was more balanced and he wouldn’t traumatize students by suddenly stabbing himself. She was seeing him daily, and she wouldn’t tell Logan anything about it.

He hadn’t asked to be informed of what his son discussed with her, but he couldn’t be blamed for entertaining the thought for a fleeting second, could he? But that had been enough to alert Jeannie. She’d praised him for not voicing that impulse, but she’d also said firmly that such a thing would always be out of the question.

“Even if it’s something I should know?” he’d said slowly, thinking back on… well, on a lot of things. A lot of things he’d pretended not to see, downplaying their importance. Jean had shaken her head, her gaze understanding but stern.

“This isn’t about you, Logan.”

Well, there was that. It was, marginally… Daken had been taken from his momma and “trained” because he was Logan’s son, and none of the telepaths argued with that. But that was the extent of it.

He did know that. Now.

And he knew that his son needed time before talking to him again. Their conversation after his suicide attempt had been a first step, and Logan wasn’t going to fuck it up by imposing anything. He still had to clear the air – explain to Daken what had really happened when he’d taken his son’s Muramasa claws – but he knew that would be a horribly emotionally charged conversation, so he’d decided to give it time. Daken wasn’t going anywhere… and he was settling down, it seemed.

He spent a lot of time reading on a bench in a more secluded area of the lawn, for instance. Sometimes Gabby would be with him, and it was really a joy to see the change that overcame him whenever the little one was around. Logan wasn’t keeping tabs or anything, but they were bound to cross paths, every now and then, especially when they jogged. Daken always bowed his head slightly in greeting and asked Logan how he was, which would have to be enough for now.

He seemed to appreciate that. The space Logan was giving him.

He was also attending Betsy’s yoga class, which she’d finally reestablished after overcoming her own identity crisis. They crossed paths there, too, and Logan had spent the first lesson staring at his
son’s impeccable form until Kitty had elbowed him.

Kitty was apparently pondering whether to offer Daken a class to teach. Jean had said it would be beneficial to his healing process, and they didn’t want Daken to feel as if he was living off charity. Logan didn’t need to be told anything about Daken’s state of mind to know that letting him think that would be a terrible mistake.

For now it was still in the works, though; Kitty was waiting to see how well Daken integrated at the school. And there wasn’t any spoken resistance, but it was one thing to allow Daken to stay, and another to allow him contact with malleable minds. It would have to be a small class, probably, with seniors. And supervised, at first. Or perhaps something for the adults, like Betsy’s yoga class.

Daken seemed to ignore all the buzz, even if Logan doubted he wasn’t aware of it. He sparred in the Danger Room, sometimes: either with Lorna, with Jimmy, or with Laura – who was finally taking time for herself too, which was great after wearing herself out in worry over Daken for weeks. Logan saw her around the campus with Jubilee a lot, or going out; they were a sight for sore eyes.

Jimmy was patiently bearing Logan’s attempts to communicate, but he wasn’t much responsive. He still preferred Lorna’s company, and he was apparently making friends among the student body. Still, he seemed to be more at ease with Daken and Laura; and he’d finally told Logan that theirs wasn’t his family. Yes, circumstance and genetics said it was, or the next closest thing; but he bemoaned those he’d lost from his world he couldn’t come back to. Logan could sympathize, and he’d backed off for now.

Laura… Laura wasn’t speaking with Logan.

She wasn’t avoiding him, exactly, but neither was she actively seeking his company. She was skittish, disturbed by something, but she couldn’t say what, never going past surface conversations that really, held no real meaning. Mostly they talked about the search for Soteira, which still bore no results. That was fucking annoying, by the way, but Kitty was still positive they were on the right track.

He and Laura had never talked much, but there had always been a connection; he’d always known he could reach out to her, and she’d always know she could talk to him. Now it felt like there was a wall, something he’d glimpsed while they searched for Daken, something she’d shown after his misunderstanding with Daken. And she’d been right about being angry, but after her apology the day of Daken’s attempt to take his own life, Logan had thought that would be it… It hadn’t been, evidently.

Betsy said they’d work it out.

Kurt and ’Ro seemed to agree with her. But they also knew when he was itching for something, feeling trapped, ruminating on too many things at once – which was why his partners had decided to take him out for dinner tonight.

And it had come at just the right time, when he felt he could do something stupid… like interrupting one of Laura’s dates to ask her what was wrong, or sliding on the bench beside Daken, or running away to handle the Soteira problem himself.

He welcomed the idea, because he now knew when he was spiraling out of control.

So they cleaned up – ’Ro looked stunning in a silver jumpsuit, and Kurt was so handsome in a grey tuxedo – and they went to see *The Phantom of the Opera*. Always a good one, that, and Logan leaned comfortably in his seat, absorbed in the swirls and turns of the music.
Afterwards, when they succeeded in evading the press – the sight of three of the most notorious X-Men was bound to claim attention, and Logan was still a novelty after his recent return from the dead – they got into a Japanese restaurant he’d always wanted to try but hadn’t ever gotten around to; ‘Ro had remembered, of course. It was good, to sit with them and eat and talk about things that didn’t worry him. His mind did turn towards them from time to time but Kurt always knew how to brush his leg against Logan’s to ground him to reality, and ‘Ro’s hand was a warm consolation on his arm, and they were both so beautiful and kind and understanding, and they were both his, and this was a fine, beautiful night.

The only warning he got was an absence of scent, a black hole where his senses told him there ought to be a person. Then a woman he hadn’t seen in years slid into their booth, in front of Logan, beside Kurt.

Logan tensed. He stared, barely hearing the maître asking if the madame really was with them, he hadn’t managed to stop her, he really was dreadfully sorry –

She smiled sardonically, tilting her head and picking up a nigiri from Kurt’s plate with her long-nailed fingers. She observed it like it was an insect before popping it into her mouth. She never broke eye-contact with Logan.

Logan felt dizzy.

“Daijoubu,” he told the maître, and waited until the man was gone.

God, but she was still striking. That brilliant red hair pinned on her head, that strong jaw, the muscles rippling beneath the sheer fabric. A predator refusing to mask herself.

Remus, Romulus’ twin sister.

‘Ro squeezed his arm, wanting to know if it really was fine. Wanting to know if the woman was a threat. Kurt adjusted his position, too, to teleport Remus away before she harmed civilians.

Her presence was too much of a coincidence, after their visit to Romulus. She’d helped put him in prison, yes, but he was still her brother… And yet, she’d never given Logan reason to think her an enemy -

But that was before he realized how much Romulus had hurt Daken. And a question he hadn’t even thought while they worked together – and wasn’t that strange on its own, and didn’t Romulus possess minor telepathic powers, and didn’t it stand to reasons his twin did too ? – now burned in Logan’s mind: hadn’t she known what her brother had been up to? Why hadn’t she stopped it? Hadn’t she cared that a small child was being tortured?

“I come in peace,” she said as she settled on her knees, her hands resting non-threateningly on her thighs. She cocked her head, turning her attention to ’Ro: the air around his partner rippled with electricity, contained for now. “Remus,” she introduced herself, “Romulus’ sister. I never condoned his methods,” she added, quietly, as Kurt made to grab her arm.

She probably could have ripped off Kurt’s before any of them could do anything. With the way she and Romulus moved… the same way Daken had been taught to…

Logan met Kurt’s gaze and shook his head. For now, he wanted to hear what she had to say. Discreetly, he sent a telepathic notice for the school’s telepaths to pick up: all the X-Men were trained to do that; he could only hope his partners were doing the same even as they nodded and ostensibly relaxed.
Remus grinned and placed a hand on her chest as if wounded, so perhaps she did indeed possess some telepathic powers. But then she sobered, returning her hand to her thigh.

“I thought you’d be pleased to see me.” She cocked her head, a few strands of hair escaping artfully, and glanced first at Kurt, then at ‘Ro. “Yours? Both of them?” she said, a slow delighted grin spreading on her face. “Greedy.”

“What can we do for you?” Kurt said politely, though he smelt incensed. ‘Ro, too, was a quiet simmering fury at Logan’s side. They could read between the lines; perhaps they’d reached Logan’s same conclusions. By saying she “didn’t condone” her brother’s methods, Remus had all but confirmed she’d never bothered to stop him.

Not until the end, anyway, when she’d asked for Logan’s help. And Logan refused to believe a giant like her would even need Logan’s help. Had it all been some game between the siblings?

Remus laughed, a light cascading sound. “You? Oh, you can’t do anything for me. I’m here because I did something for you.” She returned her attention to Logan, effectively dismissing his partners. “Consider it repayment for taking Romulus out of the equation.”

Slowly, to show she wasn’t going to attack, she retrieved a pen drive from the folds of her dress and placed it by Logan’s hand. He stilled, intrigued despite himself but wary.

“What is that?” asked ‘Ro.

Remus ignored her. “Don’t I deserve at least a greeting, Logan? We’ve had such fun together, you and I,” she said, her teeth glinting. He’d never noticed how sharp they were. “Perhaps I could join you and your pets, sometimes?”

Hell, every hair on his body stood on end. He felt intimidated, and he didn’t like that. Why had he thought that sleeping with such an ancient thing was a good idea? With Romulus’ sister.

Kurt was in his line of sight. ‘Ro was beside him. His pillars, unwavering and fierce.

“Hello, Remus,” he choked out. Christ, his voice felt like gravel. “We’ll have to pass,” he said more firmly, focusing on ‘Ro’s body heat, on Kurt’s heartbeat.

She sighed. “Ah, you’ve become boring.” She stretched her long neck. “Well. Aren’t you curious?” She tilted her head towards the pen drive. He eyed it.

The facts: though she was really making him uncomfortable now, and she obviously saw much of what had happened to both Logan and Daken as fleeting nuisances, not worthy of fighting her brother until it served her some purpose… she’d fought at Logan’s side, and she’d claimed to love him then. She was giving him something now. A repayment; he supposed that even ancient beings know it’s better to tie up loose ends.

“What is it?” He drummed his fingers, but still didn’t touch the pen drive.

“Information,” she said. “The location of Soteira’s base of operations, and names and location of those I didn’t bother with tracking down.” She flicked her wrist with an affected air of boredom, as if she hadn’t just given him what they’d been scrambling for weeks to find.

“How -” Kurt began.

“I have my methods, son of Azazel.” Kurt started and then composed himself, the only tell the way his yellow eyes were blazing.
“Tracking down,” said ’Ro. Remus looked at her, an eyebrow arched. Logan furrowed his brow. Yes, Remus’ wording had been strange. “You didn’t bother to track the others down,” continued ’Ro, a hand splayed on the table. “But you went to the base, didn’t you?”

Logan caught up. “What will we find?”

“Oh, corpses.” Remus waved a hand. “You’d have given them all to the authorities, and I couldn’t let alive people who thought they could use ferals. Who thought they could use you.” She bared her teeth.

It was the very same thing that he’d have done, had he been working alone. He couldn’t take any high ground there.

But she’d bothered to annihilate a threat to ferals only when it had involved him. She was as her brother, uncaring of everything save for what interested her.

Would Daken have been caught in the crossfire, if she attacked Soteira before they saved him? Would she have fought and killed Logan’s son without a care in the world?

Logan closed a fist around the pen drive. “Thank you. Was there a Marcus Roston?”


“Poor thing?”

“He was being milked for his powers.” Remus passed a finger over her lips. “His blood. A hallucinogenic, no? He was comatose, more a skeleton that anything else. My favorite slew that one. She slit his throat: mercy killing.” The mirth in her eyes said the contrary, but none of them commented. “Did you want to kill him yourself? I know he had a run-in with your son.”

Logan gritted his teeth. “No, it doesn’t matter. The important thing is he’s dead.” He didn’t spare a thought for the bastard who’d traumatized Daken: he’d had it coming.

But the other bastard…

“Did you know?” He blurted out. ’Ro squeezed his arm to comfort him.

“Mh?” Remus said, distracted. “Did I know they had you? No, I’d have intervened sooner.”

“No.” She didn’t care. She quite clearly hadn’t cared. “Did you know what Romulus was doing to my son?”

Remus clenched her jaw in something like annoyance, her eyes flashing, but then she sighed. “My brother and I survived this long because we learnt early on not to interfere in each other’s affairs,” she said, monotone.

“You interfered when you helped me put him in prison,” Logan pointed out.

“Well, yes,” she cocked her head, her eyes glinting. “It was rather time for a change, wasn’t it? And he was threatening you.” She tried to take his hand, but he took it off the table and into his lap. He thought he would surely try to stab her if she kept this up, and it was a fight they couldn’t win amongst civilians. She shook her head. “I’m sorry your son was hurt. Romulus has always lacked finesse.” She was reciting a spiel, no empathy in her voice.

He didn’t want to hear her anymore. He couldn’t cope with the indifference. “I see,” he said, trying
to keep his voice calm. She could surely sense some of his surface thoughts, but she seemed more amused than anything else. “Thank you for disposing of Soteira.”

She smiled. “Anytime, caro.”

With that, she was standing up, towering over them even more than if they’d been all on their feet. Scrambling to stand up themselves now would only show fear. And he didn’t want her to think that. He wanted her to see how controlled he was, and how unperturbed he was, and how ready he was.

She chuckled. “Perhaps next time we’ll see each other you’ll have dropped the pets.” Without any passing glance to Logan’s partners, she was gone, so quickly he had to check himself.

They exchanged glances. Kurt and ’Ro knew him; they knew the tension simmering beneath sinews and muscle. They knew he was barely containing his rage… for what she hadn’t done, for what she’d practically admitted to doing. Oh, she’d known. She’d known very well about Daken, and she hadn’t lifted a finger.

She’d just bode her time until she knew she could easily take down her brother’s empire. To what end, Logan didn’t know. To take it? To build her own? To protect her own that maybe already existed, and take his place? Time for a change, she’d said.

How hadn’t Logan questioned anything at the time? Anything at all?

Because she was just as her brother, that’s why. Because she must have done something to him, to his mind.

She was ruthless, that much was clear; as intelligent as Romulus, if she’d managed to stay hidden all these years.

She had resources at her disposal that he couldn’t fathom, and she’d shown that she didn’t care about Logan’s son or any other member of his family, and – most importantly – now she’d had access to information that could be dangerous for his family… and he had no way of knowing if she’d retained it, or if she’d use it.

So now Logan would have to take her out, same as her brother.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Father and son talk.

[I’m not going to touch that Lupines mess (Wolverine vol 2, issues 310-313) with a ten-foot pole, but Remus is too interesting to discard; that mini opened up too many possibilities to pass. I see her as different from how we saw her there, though, as disquieting as her brother; I certainly think she spent that entire mini lying through her teeth. Let me know what you think, your comments make my day! ^-^ ]
Father and son talk.

Chapter Notes

Additional Warnings: mentions of suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Daken didn’t give Logan time to say anything.

“Can’t this wait?” he sighed as soon as his father diverged from the path to seemingly join him on the bench.

Logan had chosen the worst possible time to approach him: later that day Johnny would come over. A meeting they’d danced around for days, talking about nothing — oh, but how soothing to hear Johnny’s voice! — on the phone. Daken was going to sit Johnny down and bare it all: all the flavors of fucked up he was. And he would abide by what Johnny decided then.

It was straight up what Logan had told him to do, and that was harrowing enough. But he needed to. And Grey said it would do him good, to open himself up to a friend like that. To which Daken had countered that he didn’t want Johnny to be just a friend. Or… he didn’t know what he wanted, really. He just knew that he felt so deeply, but he didn’t want to string Johnny along without letting him know what kind of clusterfuck he’d fling himself into.

“It will do you good,” Grey had repeated, smiling.

It was bound to be a taxing conversation. So it wasn’t wise to have another taxing conversation on the same day. He found that he wouldn’t mind talking with Logan, per se… but it would surely cut open old wounds, leaving him raw, and there was a small possibility that it would leave him also prone to lash out, and Johnny didn’t deserve that.

Logan hesitated, there on the smaller path, and seemed to be considering. Then he took a fortifying breath.

Daken looked up from the book he was reading and bit back a growl at seeing his father’s face; God, he still hated Logan’s martyr act, the way he seemed to hunch over under the weight of circumstances so laughably out of his control.

And yet he was waiting to talk. Daken rolled his eyes, and hoped he wouldn’t come to regret this. “Yes?”

Logan exhaled. “I’m sorry, son. It’s important, and… I don’t want you to think I hid it from you.” He winced.

Daken bit the inside of his cheek. He felt his jaw clenching on its own — he’d decided that Logan’s lie wasn’t worth falling back into bad habits, but that didn’t mean that he couldn’t feel annoyance and betrayal — and closed the book on his lap. “Sit down, then.”
Logan reached him in a few fast steps and joined him on the bench, sitting a good few respectful inches away.

He took his sweet time, arranging himself in a non-threatening manner, resting his forearms on his parted thighs, his hands clasped and dangling between his legs. He wasn’t looking at Daken, for which Daken was frankly grateful.

Daken crossed his legs and rested an arm on the backrest opposite from Logan, his fingers drumming on the cover of the book. “Well?”

Logan took another breath. “How’s things with Jeannie, son? Not asking what you do or anything,” he hastened to say when Daken gritted his teeth. “Just… How are you?”

“It’s going well,” Daken said quietly, already regretting this.

It was going well. It was a maddeningly slow process, but he probably wouldn’t have borne doing it for long periods of time anyway. Grey took out a threat at a time with great care; Xavier’s mistake, she’d explained the first day, after apologizing for her old mentor’s dangerous attempt, had been to try to dismantle everything in one go. But now, after interrogating Romulus, she knew the inner workings of the monster’s mind – Daken had shuddered as she explained this – and so she knew that what plagued Daken was a carefully woven thread, whose knots were to be untied with sharp precision and a light touch. All in all it was always anticlimactic, but it left her tired and him uneasy, so it was do be done in small steps.

And she was taking care of the mind traps, too; when she was done, she’d teach Daken to resist telepathy on his own. It was alarming to think he could be left defenseless to any type of attack similar to Soteira’s, but worse still would be to stay even one minute more under Romulus’ control.

The rest of the time she would devote to go over a memory of Daken’s choosing. So far he’d only selected recent things, safe things – never Romulus – but she didn’t comment on that, letting Daken set the pace. He had the impression that she knew already everything there was to know about him, but there was never any reckless comment or any nudge towards the truly big things.

Talking about his memories, even walking through them physically while Grey pointed things out… it was a strange experience. He’d resisted, at first. He didn’t see the point; the point had been to free him from Romulus’ shadow, looming in his nightmares. But that didn’t come just from shadowy networks embedded in him.

Romulus was a constant in his life, a parasite that had carved its way in. He’d molded how Daken reacted to the world around him. He’d taken a child and made him a neurotic mess with issues the size of Himalaya. And Daken was beginning to see that leaning on Laura and talking with Lorna about being possessed wasn’t enough.

“Good,” Logan said haltingly, pulling Daken away from his thoughts. “That’s good. I, ah, thought it best to talk to you before your session -” he trailed off.

“So Grey would pick up the pieces if you were to traumatize me?” Daken sneered. “How thoughtful, Logan.” It was, though. At least his father was learning.

“Son -”

“I’m all ears.” Daken interrupted him. It this was to be so terrible, he wanted to get it over with quickly.

“All right.” Logan nodded to himself. “First off, this ain’t about Romulus… he’s still in prison.
Everything’s fine on that front, son,” he said gently.

Daken felt oddly touched. It was mingled with irritation, as would always be when Logan attempted to talk about it, but it was refreshing to see him approach the topic with a modicum of sensitivity. It was the least he could do, after lying to Daken.

“I know,” he managed to say. Logan looked at him sharply, clearly taken aback. “You’d have told me differently,” Daken explained, “You probably would have sought out Laura’s help to talk to me, or maybe even Grey’s.”

Logan looked thoughtful. “That… sounds like what I’d have done, yes.”

“Mmm. Remember that if he does break out.” He shuddered at the mere idea. Logan gazed away, giving him… privacy? “So what is it, Logan? Did the X-Men find Roston?”

“He’s dead,” Logan said. Daken straightened up, the old fury coming to the surface before he could rein it in.

“Again?” he snarled. “You took matters into your hands again, Logan? You didn’t even think to warn me that you found him and you were going in?”

Logan stared, wide-eyed and ashen. “Wrong thing to lead with,” he said weakly.

“No shit!” Daken snapped, making to stand. Oh, he needed Grey all right. Was he relieved Roston was dead? Absolutely. Would it have hurt Logan to show him some respect? Evidently it had, otherwise he would have given Daken at least the bare minimum –

“No, no, it wasn’t me, I found out last night. Please listen to me,” Logan whispered, his gaze darting towards the lawn. There were some kids around, after all.

Daken deflated. “You found out last night?” he repeated, taking a sniff at his father: Logan was telling the truth. Daken fell back hard on the bench. Logan was making an aborted motion towards his arm and thought better of it when he saw Daken’s glare. “You went on a date with Munroe and Wagner last night,” he ground out.

Everything all right? came Grey’s voice, just at the edge of his mind. He started; he’d never get used to it. She and her daughter were taking turns with keeping an eye on him: the price to pay so that he could roam free again after his suicide attempt on the lawn.

For now, he said ominously. He wondered if Grey had known Logan would ambush him this morning, but no; she’d have warned him, or attempted to prepare him. Will you see me earlier if this goes to hell?

Of course. And remember you can always walk away, Daken.

I’ll keep that in mind. Daken tilted his head to watch his father: Logan looked like he was reconsidering every life decision he’d ever made and especially this one. Evidently he hadn’t thought to first talk this through with whoever was apparently helping him not to put his foot in his mouth.

“Yes,” he finally answered, when Daken arched an eyebrow at him. “I was with Kurt and ’Ro. We were approached, um… the Soteira threat has been dealt with. We checked – the places we were told are there, and they fit. The scientists were all murdered .”

“Dealt with?” Daken repeated. “So we’re allegedly safe?”
“Soteira’s gone, yes -” That wasn’t an answer.

“Everyone murdered. Convenient. It did occur to you that the research could have been swept up to be reused, I hope.” Of course it had, otherwise Logan wouldn’t be here. “Who was it that approached you?”

Logan hesitated. Daken gritted his teeth.

“What is it that you aren’t telling me, Logan?”

“Just hold on, I’m… trying to find a way to broach the topic.”

Logan did look like he was struggling with whatever he’d come to tell him; he didn’t seem shifty or evasive, he simply didn’t know what to say. He said he was here because he didn’t want Daken to think he’d hidden whatever this was from him; so Daken would give him the benefit of the doubt, at least for now – even if Logan should have gotten his story straight before approaching Daken.

“The problem,” Logan said slowly, “is that I don’t know if you know about the person in question. If not, just springing her existence on you would be… well… I don’t know how’d you react, son. Or if you do know her, and she,” his eyes flashed, “if she traumatized you -”

“This has something to do with Romulus, then,” Daken interrupted him. He didn’t like Logan using that word. It was the honest truth, but he wasn’t ready to hear it from Logan yet. And the idea that Romulus’ shadow still loomed behind Soteira even after Grey had confirmed his ignorance sent Daken’s teeth on edge. Would he ever be free from the monster?

“Not… not exactly,” Logan said. “She’s a sort of enemy of his, but I don’t know if she’s always acted as such.” Well, that simplified things.

“Any woman tasked with my education is long dead,” Daken offered quietly. The implication that his education had been traumatizing wasn’t lost on Logan, if his sharp intake of breath was of any indication. But then again, that was no news; perhaps he was simply surprised that Romulus hadn’t been the only one to impart lessons. “And I know of no female enemies.”

Logan exhaled heavily. “So you don’t know her.”

“I don’t know her,” Daken confirmed. He wondered who she was, to make Logan think that the mere knowledge of her existence would send Daken running for the hills. He was, again, oddly touched by the care Logan was taking with this conversation; hell, it might even give him whiplash. “Why don’t you start at the beginning, Logan?”

“The beginning.” Logan nodded, then shook his head. “That would mean…” He groaned. He stank of shame, suddenly, and regret. Daken braced himself for the inevitable tale of woe. “That would mean that first I’d have to talk about something I’d wanted to say when you felt better, son, hell, I wanted to ask Jeannie to be there too -” Logan trailed off, grimacing.

Daken sighed. “Well, I’m most definitely seeing Grey right after this, Logan, so get on with it.” Logan was going to blurt out some apology or the other, he just knew it.

Logan wrung his hands. Dammit, he was really worked up over this. “I just don’t want this to be a footnote, son, because it’s not. I respect the issue, and I wanted to give it all the importance it deserved. Because you matter.”

Daken sighed. He felt warm all over, his breath caught in his throat. Ridiculous. It was ridiculous for him to be so affected by such a simple speech, when he
didn’t even know what this was about.

How long had he wanted to just be taken seriously? For Logan to see, and act accordingly? Logan was showing more attention today than even after Daken’s suicide attempt. It stung, and his chest ached.

It wasn’t a bad sensation.

“You’re excused on account of the extenuating circumstances, Logan,” he manged to choke out. His voice felt thin, shattered. “Spill.”

Logan stayed silent for a long time, so long that Daken was about to tell him they didn’t have all day. Then he spoke up, slowly, and with great care.

“The day I took your claws,” was all he managed to get out, because Daken froze, every muscle taut. He didn’t comment as Daken fought to get his breathing under control, as he clenched his fists… the claws straining to get out.

Daken didn’t want to talk about this: this was the one single issue he didn’t want Logan to ever mention again. He’d decided to be above it, and that was final. His whole relationship with Logan, this fragile, strange, utterly mad thing they were building here, hinged on never acknowledging Logan’s worst crime.

“No,” he ground out. Faintly, he reached out for Grey.

Logan winced. “Son -”

Can you leave on your own? Grey said. Or do you want me there?

I… I don’t know. Louder, he enunciated: “No, Logan. Respect my boundaries.” Dammit, his voice shook.

You’re doing great. I’m on my way.

“Leave,” Daken said.

“I’m sorry, son.” Logan got up and walked away.

But he didn’t leave. He stood on the larger path, waiting; Daken felt his gaze on him. Perhaps he was worried Daken would harm himself; but Daken wouldn’t resort to that. At least he only had that response to certain things. He breathed, in and out, for what felt like aeons.

Logan yelped. Grey was striding towards them like a fury, her aura visible even to Daken, her hair floating. She looked absolutely furious. She reached Logan, who hastily got out of her way, but she stood there and grabbed Logan’s arm with a strength Daken didn’t think she had in her.

Her mind touched Daken’s gently, ever so gently. He was a whirlwind, a mess, and she soothed the wrinkles and waves, speaking calmly through the storm. He didn’t focus on the words, but on her voice, lulling him, in time with his breaths.

And in the background there were frantic whispers, as Grey evidently couldn’t hold two different telepathic conversations, not with the careful way Daken’s mind had to be navigated. Unfortunately, Daken still got his hypersenses. She must be assessing that he did hear them, but there was nothing to be done about it. She could only try to lower her voice more, but her rage made it practically impossible: it was a strained hiss, perfectly audible.
“Get inside, don’t make me make you.”

“I can’t, this is important -”

“He’s learning that his will is his own, Logan, and you can’t overrule his will. If he doesn’t want to talk about something with you, you don’t approach the subject, do you understand?”

“Dammit, read my mind!”

Silence. Daken breathed in and out as he felt Grey recede infinitesimally; he was calming down, so she could.

She exhaled.

“Betsy didn’t tell me...”

“Because then you’d have known when he still didn’t, and you’re his therapist. And that’s a relationship that should be built on trust, no?”

“Logan.” Grey’s voice was stern. “It doesn’t change the fact that he doesn’t want to talk about this with you. Get inside.”

“There’s a possible threat,” Logan whispered urgently. “I have to tell him, and if there’s a way to tell him without mentioning that day, tell me! I can’t just mention it without apologizing for it, dammit!”

“You think she’s a threat,” Grey said, serious.

“Don’t you? Feel her, in my mind.” Grey receded a little more from Daken, still brushing him soothingly. He felt better now, so it was a little redundant, but it did feel nice, and it meant he could still eavesdrop. “Dammit, she’s dangerous for sure. I don’t know about an immediate threat, but I know she can’t be trusted. And it’s a damn big thing to hide until he’s ready to talk about that other thing, and I will not hide anything from him anymore!”

That was what got to Daken. That fucking earnest and urgent whisper, as if Logan finally got it, as if he understood viscerally what he’d done wrong.

So he grit his teeth and composed himself. Grey was here, ready to catch him if he fell. If Logan really thought there was a threat, one linked to Romulus, he wanted to hear it.

If he had to suffer through Logan’s apology for that, so be it. And perhaps – there was a small, minuscule possibility – the apology would satisfy him.

He was only saddened that he’d have to postpone with Johnny: he wasn’t sure he’d leave this meeting unscathed.

He’d been so looking forward to seeing Johnny again.

“Logan,” he called out. Logan started and watched him warily; Grey hovered at the edge of Daken’s mind, and asked him: Are you sure?

He fervently hoped he was.

“I’ll hear you out,” he told his father.
Next: apologies and realizations.

[We’re here, finally! It only took what, thirty chapters? Alas, Logan was being stubborn. What do you think? Will the oncoming conversation go well? Let me know your thoughts, your comments always make my day! ^_^ ]
Apologies and realizations.

Chapter Notes

Did you see the news? Daken’s apparently going to feature in the coming Wolverine solo, together with Laura. To top it off, the writer’s talking about them as “a family”! I can’t wait.

Additional Warnings: panic attack, dry heaving, descriptions of child abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

35.

They relocated to Grey’s office.

Daken felt exposed there on the lawn, vulnerable to prying eyes. He walked ahead of Grey and Logan, because he didn’t want to meet Logan’s gaze… it was enough to feel its weight as he quickly navigated the corridors, wanting to get this over with. He fished his phone out of his pocket and bit his lower lip as he pondered how to word the bad news.

Finally, he typed: ‘Rain check? I’m sorry.’

Johnny answered immediately. ‘Don’t be. Everything all right?’

Daken paused. Should he tell him? No lies. Never again lies. ‘I don’t know. But it’s okay, I’m with Grey.’ Johnny knew already that Daken was seeking help: at least the conversation Daken was planning wouldn’t come as a complete surprise. ‘Are you free tomorrow?’ He hoped he’d be functional the next day, anyway. And he yearned to see Johnny, now more than ever.

‘Of course. Take care. And call me if you need anything!’

Johnny. Daken’s chest ached and soared. ‘Tomorrow, then.’ He pocketed the phone with a sigh.

Just in time; he’d reached Grey’s office. He waited for her to open it, standing awkwardly beside Logan as they both carefully avoided eye contact, and then took his usual seat on her settee. Logan lowered himself to the chair in front of Grey’s desk; he was staring at the floor.

Grey put herself between them, her back to Logan. “Remember,” she told Daken firmly. “This ends when you say so.”

He nodded; he knew. He settled himself rigidly against the cushions – he couldn’t relax, not really; he had to put a conscious effort into working his body to a relatively comfortable position.

Grey smiled at him encouragingly; then she turned towards Logan and leant against her desk. “When you’re ready, Logan.”

Logan looked up from his hands, which he was keeping in his lap and studying with great interest, and met Daken’s gaze. His was earnest and frank enough that Daken managed to hold it.
He’d never noticed how bloody similar their eyes were. The same startling shade of blue, bright like a summer sky. The shape, of course, Daken had taken from his mother.

They were bound, he and Logan. They were blood, family. They’d gotten it all so wrong, again and again; Daken held a measure of blame as well. He wanted to try this.

Logan took a deep breath and released a bomb on him.

“T’m sorry I made you feel unsafe, son.”

It was so different from what Daken had expected him to say that he started, his spine snapping straight. He wasn’t simply taken aback – he’d thought Logan would apologize again for not listening, or perhaps for maiming him, or for lying – he felt an ache in his chest, a sting in his eyes, and he had no idea where were they coming from. Unsafe? What did that have to do with anything?

He looked away. “What makes you think -” he broke off; he couldn’t finish the sentence. He tried again. “Why -” A lump closed his throat. Panicked, he glanced up to see Grey’s gaze fixed on him, firm and comforting. He didn’t know what was happening; he didn’t know why Logan had said that, and he didn’t know why it made him feel that way, tense and… relieved? He felt such abject relief that he was having trouble sorting through his thoughts.

“A moment, Logan,” Grey said softly. Breathe, she added in Daken’s mind. In and out. Do you want to continue?

I don’t know what he means! He grabbed at the fabric beside him. Why was he so rattled?

Do you want to know what he means?

Yes. He gulped on air, his fingers tightening around a cushion. Better the knowledge, always. He could have chalked everything up to Logan not understanding anything as usual, but his own reaction spoke of a different story. Yes.

All right. “Perhaps you could elaborate, Logan?” Grey suggested.

Logan heaved a heavy sigh. “When I... took out Romulus. I used you, deceived you for my plan -” He paused, for Daken was shaking his head. That had been normal... to be expected, even; Daken himself had tried to deceive Logan, to get to Romulus first. To take his vengeance –

“I don’t care about that,” he choked out. This wasn’t it. This wasn’t what was tearing at Daken, what was filling him with something he couldn’t name, with confusion, with an odd peace. “The point is that you took it from me. It should have been me.” That was safer ground: he knew that. He felt that. That betrayal: Logan’s crime. And afterwards, the lie.

“Yes,” Logan agreed. “I should have let you handle it. But that’s not the only thing I did to you, son.” Daken repressed a shudder; he remembered that day, it was seared in his brain. “I got it all wrong because I didn’t listen. I underestimated the damage and I hurt you even more than you already were. I stopped the threat and I got rid of the weapons and I thought I’d saved you, but that’s not what I did, did I, son?” Logan was speaking quietly, gently, and Daken was utterly under his spell, entranced by the words. “That’s not what you saw. What you saw was me disposing of a rival, taking his place, taking you as spoils of war. Disciplining an underling.”

Daken was reeling. The scent of his own blood in his nostrils, and that sickening sound as his flesh was parted, as the slick wrist-claw was dislodged from its place – Logan’s face swimming before his vision, stern and set on the task...
“I took his place, didn’t I, son? I was the new master. I made you feel unsafe. You were struggling to escape, to free yourself from him. And I just replaced him. I’m sorry.”

Logan fell silent. Daken only noticed because now he heard starkly these small, wet sounds. His hands were held by someone… Grey; there was her warm comforting presence at the edge of his mind, stopping him from spiraling into the darkness.

He remembered how he’d struggled as he nursed himself back to health, as he tried to make sense of what he felt – the cold betrayal, the terror, the relief at knowing Romulus was gone. He remembered how he’d rationalize as righteous fury the hysteria that took him whenever he recalled Logan’s impromptu surgery… or better yet, the punishment, a word that caught him unawares in the dead of night as he sweat off the fever from the metal poisoning. A word he’d blurted out to Logan nights ago, as he bled all his panic and resentment.

It seemed that Logan had listened to something Daken hadn’t even been aware of saying, of feeling.

Unsafe. That’s how he’d felt. Yes: now he recognized it. It was utterly ridiculous, because the scale was completely off. Logan had taken no place, he’d done nothing past that.

He’d just punished Daken. Made Daken feel as if he was being punished.

Unsafe. Yes; it rang true.

It was the hiccup that made him realize he was crying; and he must have been crying for quite some time, if the wet patches on his trousers were anything to go by. Logan sat in front of him, waiting, infinite sorrow in his gaze. There was no flinching from what he’d caused, but acknowledgment. It was… it made Daken feel seen.

It felt good, to feel seen.

“That was how he molded me,” he said, wanting to offer something. An explanation; for Logan to see even more. Logan’s gaze sharpened and he leaned towards Daken, wanting perhaps to get closer, to comfort Daken; wondering if he could, deciding against it. Daken dried his face with the back of a hand, though a few tears stayed stuck on his lashes.

Grey gently touched his mind. Are you sure?

Perhaps he hadn’t ever been so sure of anything in his life. It had felt… strange, and good, to dig out fragments of Akihira and Natsumi the other day, to present their memory to Logan like precious mementos of himself. He had to disclose himself to heal. Yes, Grey.

She arranged herself to face Logan again then, her hand inches from Daken’s. “You can ask, Logan.”

His father took a breath. “He molded you with… with punishment?”

Daken nodded, looking down at his hands. Now it was his turn to stare at his lap; he wasn’t sure he could face Logan. “Punishment was never nothing quite so simple as disciplining an underling,” he began quietly. “It was part of the training. My education was a delicate balance of punishment and reward. I couldn’t always anticipate the behavior that would get me punished, but there was always a… a lesson.” He shut his eyes, remembering. It was never deranged; there was method to the madness, if one dug deeper… he could see it, now. When there weren’t discernible motives, it was to throw Daken off the scent; to make him feel, indeed, unsafe. To make Romulus the compass of his health, the idol that controlled the tide; immutable, inscrutable. Something to never be understood, only feared.
He opened his eyes: Logan was studying him intently, his jaw clenched – his fist closed, white-knuckled. He looked old beyond belief. “What kind -” he broke off, shaking his head. He didn’t dare asking.

“What kind of punishment?” Daken returned his attention to his hands; they were shaking slightly. Phantom pain. It was the blessing and the curse of healing factors: you’d never show what you lived through. But the body remembered. “The first time -” he fell silent. Honestly, the first times had been better, in retrospective: the beatings, the physical torture, had come when he was more developed. Break a child too much and you’ll have a ghost, and Romulus… Romulus had wanted him functional. To the bare minimum, but functional all the same.

And the fact that he could still think something so insane filled Daken with rage. Abuse was abuse. Did it matter if the first times he hadn’t bled?

“At the beginning, I was given to women for a formal education.” A few disgraced geisha; he’d had to learn the art of seduction, in all its forms. Not that he’d tell Logan; not now, perhaps not ever. “They were Japanese,” he chose to focus on another facet of the abuse. “Mother figures, in the end. You can see where this is going.” Logan didn’t even need to know that Daken had killed Natsumi, or that up until Romulus had told him that Logan had killed his mother he’d thought she might have died giving birth to him. So subtle, too; he’d realized the purpose only when he’d discovered his life was all a lie.

Logan held his breath. Oh yes: he saw.

“I changed them every few months. The first time… when he told me to kill the first, I couldn’t. Physically, I could… I’d been trained in martial arts already. And I’d… I’d killed already. But she’d been nice to me. She wasn’t afraid of the pheromones; she’d helped me understand them.” Chiyoe – curious, he still remembered her name.

She called him Akihiro, when they were alone. Romulus called him Daken, but it hadn’t stuck yet; the old name was the last thread linking him to Akihira, and Daken had clung to it. Now that he thought about it, perhaps that had been a way to have Daken ritually kill that name, too. He’d certainly stopped using it shortly afterwards.

His own name. That, too, had been taken from him, to be replaced with a mockery to control him… to make him less than human…

Grey enveloped him. He shook himself and got back to his tale.

“So then he kept me chained to a pole all night, without clothes. I wasn’t given dinner, or breakfast, or lunch. I was young… I couldn’t go for hours without food at the time, the resistance training came later.” Though not that much later. “After all that, when I obviously couldn’t take it anymore, he put her in front of me and told me to stab her. I did.” She’d looked just like Natsumi in death… that had given him nightmares. Of course he’d learnt early on to hide them. And of course Romulus knew anyway, but if the attempt was good enough it didn’t matter. Until Romulus decided it wasn’t good enough, of course. “When it was done he fed me and dressed me and praised me. A few repeats of that and I took to it like he’d intended.”

That first time was also the first time he’d called Daken a good boy. He’d pulled Daken into his lap and he’d patted Daken’s hair and he’d kissed Daken’s forehead, and he’d fed him morsels of food and washed the blood off him and finally tucked him in.

That was the extent of his physical “affection” for a few years; at least that. At least he’d wanted Daken “willing” and, most importantly, skilled before taking him to bed –
Daken’s stomach lurches violently; he managed to slam a hand against his mouth just in time. He breathed – in and out, in and out – as Grey hovered by him, her presence a soft blanket that masked somewhat the pang of bile on his tongue. Daken, when... when you’re ready, we’ll have to talk about this too, Grey said softly.

I know. God, he knew. But not now... not now.

The heaving subsided, Daken realized that his eyes were squeezed shut; he opened them, finding his father frozen on the chair in front of him. He smelt of sorrow so stark it was almost suffocating, his face ashen.

He’s going to have a stroke, Daken thought, remorseful. He’d needed to talk about this, but perhaps... perhaps he should have warned Logan. He couldn’t be the only one with boundaries. Some of the old resentment resurfaced in protest – this was his life and Logan had no right to act as if it affected him – but it wasn’t that simple. And it was obvious that the idea of Daken subconsciously making parallels would shake Logan.

Daken lowered his hand from his mouth. “I appreciate your apology, Logan,” he said slowly. Logan came to life, his gaze finding Daken’s. “My reaction was visceral and I hadn’t even realized why until now. I’m sure you won’t do it again,” Daken offered.

Logan shook himself. “Son -” He held up a hand like a supplicant. Daken was struck by the urge to hold it; to squeeze it.

“You had no idea of the connotations,” he said instead. “It’s... it’s not all right, I can’t say that. But I acknowledge your apology, Logan.”

His father searched Grey’s gaze as if wondering what to do, lost; he must have seen in her eyes that this was still good, because he nodded and glanced at his lap again.

You’re doing great, Grey said. Do you want to continue?

The worst was behind them. Sure.

Grey hesitated. Before talking about the threat, there’s still another thing he needs to tell you.

The thing Braddock hid from you, he surmised. This couldn’t have been it, because Grey had been in his mind; she must have already known of the declawing, and she probably had divined the root of Daken’s problem with it too.

Yes. She sighed. To protect my relationship with you.

That was shrewd of Braddock. And probably the right call: if this turned out to be an even worse thing, he’d have shunned Grey for having hidden it from him. Let’s hear it, then.


Logan linked his hands on his lap and raised his head. “All right, son. Here’s... here’s the thing. Romulus came back, some time after... after that.” He waved a hand to convey their fight, the declawing. Daken’s blood run cold. “He went just after me and I managed to throw him into prison and now he is locked up real good,” Logan reiterated in an attempt to reassure him, “but he could have gone after you if he managed to overpower me. I should have warned you he was out. I’m sorry I didn’t.”

Daken inhaled sharply. The thought of what Romulus could have done to him... catching him...
unawares, after Daken had attempted to kill him…

He’d dodged a fucking bullet.

He dug his fingers into a cushion. “And why didn’t you warn me?” he said lightly.

Logan shook his head. “Honestly, son, it all happened so fast. Between the moment he attacked me and when I caught him… it was over in days. But I think… that subconsciously, I must have thought that if you’d killed him and taken his place… what you’d seemed to be wanting to do then… that would have destroyed you. I know how revenge poisons everything.” His eyes shone with sincerity and earnestness. He was truly lying it all bare, trying to clean the air. “That had been my reasoning before, too, when I… when I took your claws. I thought -”

“You thought I would turn into him.” Quod sum eris: the prospect was horrifying. It was true that he’d wanted to take Romulus’ place, that he’d thought he deserved it after all he’d endured. And he’d always thought he’d never cross some lines, but he saw now that there was no telling what murdering his abuser then, when he was bathed in rage, with no instrument to heal, would have done to him.

Of course, that wouldn’t have happened, not immediately. If Romulus had caught him unawares, he’d have beaten Daken into submission again. And so Daken would have become much colder… biding his time, damaged and tattered, a bundle of broken nerves. Romulus would have kept him on a tight leash.

“You should have told me he was out,” he said tightly. Logan nodded. Daken released the cushion, pondering his next words. “Your gut instinct was correct. I don’t know what I would have become… I know that I wouldn’t be what I am now. And I’m happy with what I am now.” It was a daily fight, but it was worth it. “But never do it again, Logan. Never.”

“I won’t,” Logan hastened to say. He was staring at Daken in wonder; perhaps he’d expected it would come to blows. “I swear. Son, there’s another thing -”

“Another?” Daken groaned. “You’re sparing me nothing, are you?”

“It’s connected.” Logan glanced at Grey, then back at Daken. “I know you won’t believe me, but please hear me out first.”

He supposed he could. “Speak.”

“I never lied about what I’d done to Romulus,” Logan said quietly. Daken pushed the annoyance down.

“You did kill him, but then he came back to life?” he offered. All right, if he thought about it, it wasn’t that out of the realm of possibilities. Not with the life they all led. Romulus was a titan, for God’s sake.

“No, I… put him in the Darkforce dimension. Through Cloak –”

Daken almost laughed out loud. Logan had put someone who was obviously a telepath where he could reach a person? So bloody short-sighted. No wonder Romulus had freed himself.

“So you did lie,” he ground out.

“No,” Logan shook his head. “When I found you, that day… I told you that he was gone. You assumed I killed Romulus. So I told you that no, he wasn’t dead, he was gone. I still didn’t tell you
what I’d done to him because I didn’t want you to find him, but…”

“You’re lying,” Daken breathed. But he wasn’t: he didn’t smell of lie. But it wasn’t possible; Daken would remember –

Would he, though? Hadn’t they just established that damn meeting had done a number on him?

“I think it was a combination of the… psychological strain and the infection,” Logan was saying, quietly. “To… to cope, perhaps, your mind conjured the idea that… that Romulus was dead.” Daken stared. Every nerve in his body screamed unease at the thought that his mind would invent things. His mind was his own; the fact that he could warp reality, misremember things, was unsettling. But had it ever been his mind, really? Wasn’t it crawling with Romulus’ presence, even now -?

We’re eradicating him, Grey said. You’re safe, Daken.

Yes: that was true. The matter was being taken care of; Grey was the cure for the disease, his shining knight in white armor – cutting Romulus down one piece at a time.

“I suppose Jeannie could show you my memory,” Logan suggested gingerly, “If you don’t believe me -”

“No offense, Logan, but I don’t fancy reliving that day.” Daken grit his teeth; though they’d cleared the air, it was still a fresh wound. “If Grey confirms you’re telling the truth…”

“I do,” she said out loud, for Logan’s benefit.

“- then it’s fine by me. You never lied.” That was a relief, at least. It meant Logan had cared… had respected him enough not to deceive him, not on that; not on what really mattered.

Wait.

“You let me tear at you,” Daken breathed, incredulous. Logan’s gaze slipped to his lap again. “The other night, you let me tear at you. I could have stabbed you. You didn’t even dodge!”

Logan nodded, weariness on his features, and he shifted in his seat. “That’s right, son.”

“Why?” It made no sense. No sense at all. “You could have explained -” he trailed off. No, Logan couldn’t have, and Daken knew it. He knew that he wouldn’t have listened; not in that moment, with the wound freshly reopened.

“You were upset,” Logan said simply. “I glimpsed that thing about the punishment, and I guessed what might have happened, why you seemed so convinced I’d lied that day. You were a wreck, and I… I thought I should let you cope without forcing you to listen to me. I should take your rage and let you hate me, at least until you were well enough… well enough to let me explain.”

Logan’s cheeks were wet; Daken doubted his father noticed. He felt compelled to say something. “Logan -”

“I thought I should take responsibility, I should take this and be your father -”

Daken couldn’t take it anymore.

“You foolish old man.” He found himself getting up, striding towards his father. Logan looked up when Daken reached him, those bright blue eyes staring back at him as if Daken were gazing into a mirror. “You arrogant martyr asshole.”
“Daken.” Grey, softly.

“I don’t want a self-sacrificing scapegoat, Logan.” Daken grabbed his father’s shoulders, the contact startling them both as Logan’s eyes widened. “I don’t want you to take whatever I hurl at you because you weren’t there.” He choked on the last word, their shared grief immutable, what-should-have-beens that only made things worse. “I loathe when you do that, when you take it all on your shoulders because I’m your poor a-abused son.” He held his breath, because he’d had yet to use that word with Logan, but then he barreled on, knowing if he didn’t he’d just flee. “When you look at me like I’m broken. I’m a person and I’m healing and I want honesty. I want to know you’ll hold yourself accountable when you fuck this up, not when I think you did. I want you to tell me when I fuck this up.”

They stared at each other as Daken caught his breath. He didn’t know where that had come from, but he knew it to be true. He didn’t want his hand to be held, he didn’t want to be coddled.

He wanted the truth, always and completely. He’d lived enough without it.

His fingers were digging into Logan’s flesh and he relaxed his hold, realizing at the same time, with a jolt, that this was the first time he initiated contact with his father without it being violent. He’d let Logan touch him, in the med bay; he’d almost shuddered at the stark comfort that had given him. But this was different. This was him, touching Logan, and –

Now, his first instinct was to let go and step back but he held on, stupefied by how strange it was, how foreign, how welcome. To have this, unblemished by hate and resentment. To touch his own father.

He exhaled and squeezed; he watched the journey on Logan’s face, the puzzlement and shock and amazement, the longing. Grey left his mind, a brush so light he could almost miss it.

“I think I can do that, son,” Logan choked out.

“Good,” Daken said. “Because we have work to do. Now tell me what’s happening…” He hesitated. A word was on the tip of his tongue, a word he’d never used if not in mockery, a sharp jab whose sole purpose had only ever been to cut and make Logan bleed.

The edges softened, it felt the only word he could possibly use now.

“Tell me what’s happening,” he repeated, quietly, “father.”

Chapter End Notes

Next: A family meeting.

[He said that, he really did!
This was a really packed, emotionally draining chapter! I hope you found it satisfying.
There’s still a lot to tackle but I think we’re on the right track.
Was there a moment you appreciated the most? Let me know what you think, your comments make my day! ^_^ ]
“This Remus seems obsessed with you, son,” Old Logan said.

They were in the conference room; Pryde had just finished updating the X-Men. She’d jumped from the Soteira investigation to this new mad thing with no fuss, accustomed to the twists and turns of mutant affairs. She’d already dispatched a few teams to the locations Remus had given; the investors that were found had been given to the authorities, together with the one the X-Men still had in custody. Hank was trying to recover the deleted security feed from the facility Roston had been kept in.

They’d found his body, as Remus had told Logan, but there was no telling whether the corpse had been tampered with, or whether she’d taken something.

Pryde had managed to convince SHIELD to let the X-Men handle the corpse, on the account of it being dangerous for ferals and possibly other mutants; and on the account of Roston being disappeared from a SHIELD prison without no one being the wiser.

Being now in possession of Roston’s blood, Hank hoped amongst other things to be able to finally determine whether it was to be blamed for the disappearance of Daken’s pheromone manipulation. If even this turned out to be a goose chase, though, he’d suggest to seek in Daken’s psyche the reason for it, just as psychological strain had more than once caused Daken’s healing factor to malfunction.

Before the meeting, before Hank sent Roston’s body to his laboratory to examine him later, Daken had wanted to see it. It was pale and emaciated and not at all intimidating. Daken, pale and tight-lipped, had studied it from every angle and sniffed more than once and then, with studious but barely deceptive composure, had confirmed it was indeed Roston.

As the rest of the X-Men filed out of the conference room, the ferals threw glances at each other and decided unanimously to stay. Pryde had lingered just enough to say firmly that she expected them to report any decision they may come to, instead of going on a rogue mission. Then she’d left them to it.

So here they were: Laura, Daken, Logan, Jimmy, and Old Logan. Gabby had tried to get in, both at the beginning of the meeting and when the other X-Men left the room, but both times Jubilee had yanked her outside with a smile and a wink to Laura.

Gabby only wanted to help… but Laura couldn’t let her throw herself at this. It was different from the myriad of missions she’d already brought her little sister to; Romulus was dangerous (and she still
recalled Daken frantically telling her to take Gabby and *disappear* when they’d all thought Romulus might have something to do with Soteira), and Remus must be as well.

Laura had yet to truly confront Daken about this new development; he seemed to be taking the news that Romulus had a sibling well enough, but she knew how he let things simmer. And seeing Roston’s corpse seemed to have taken him back to those drugged days; who knew how upset he truly was.

At least she knew that Jean was keeping an eye on him.

Logan groaned. “I told you to *stop* calling me son.”

“I can’t call you *Logan,* can I?” Old Logan scoffed. “And you’re younger than me.”

“You *are* me!” Logan threw up his hands. “And I’m almost two hundred, anyway. You can’t call me *son.*”

Beside Laura, Daken chuckled. “*I’m* seventy, but you don’t hear me complaining when you address me, Logan. Suck it up.”

Logan threw him a glance. “I can’t keep calling you *that,* son,” he murmured.

Daken stilled. Laura knew just as well as Logan the meaning of the Japanese slur Daken answered to, but she’d never dared bringing attention to it: she knew there was power in choosing one’s own name; she wouldn’t take it from Daken. Even if it cut at her to call him *mongrel.*

This wasn’t the place to address the issue, either; she feared the worst, but Daken merely exhaled. “Hold that thought,” he said, pensive. Laura angled herself in time to see him bite his lower lip.

Logan’s eyebrows shot up, then he nodded. Something was happening between them: Laura knew they’d cleared some air the day before; Logan had apologized, and it had even turned out that he’d never lied about Romulus. Daken had recounted part of their conversation with a quiet amazement, but this was the first time she saw them interact after that, and… yes, they were different. Daken seemed more relaxed.

She was unbelievably glad of it. She’d feared she’d never see the day, but here they were… not only civil, but with a strange, tentative camaraderie.

Then, of course, Logan just had to overdo it. “I could… maybe… tell you what me an’ your momma were thinking…?”

Daken tensed, his nostrils flaring, his jaw set. “No.”

Logan winced; Laura hoped he’d let the matter rest. It would be a damn shame to witness so soon the first crack in their newfound relationship.

“Sorry, son. It crossed my mind and -” Logan shook his head. “Sorry.”

Daken uncoiled. “Perhaps someday,” he offered quietly.

Just a few days ago, this exchange could only have backfired spectacularly; they seemed lost in a bubble now, as if Laura and Jimmy and Old Logan weren’t even there – gazing at what they’d both lost, and at what they could take away from it. She met Old Logan’s gaze; the man seemed to be studying her.
Well, he knew her predicament; he was there when Laura had recounted her findings, in those days before Logan came back to them.

She didn’t know what held her back – what prevented her from telling Logan the truth that had been in their hearts from the start, the truth that they’d never needed in order to care about each other.

Or perhaps she did know, as Jubilee had suggested the other day: she’d gingerly said that perhaps Laura felt that this was Daken’s moment, the knitting back of a relationship that had been viciously torn apart, and that maybe Laura didn’t want to ‘steal the spotlight’. A worry that Daken himself would have deemed ridiculous, but Laura had to admit it might very well be behind her reluctance.

“You’re still taking care of him,” Jubilee had added quietly. “That’s great, that’s a beautiful thing. But I don’t think he’d want you to hold this back for his sake. He loves you too.”

That he did. He was her brother, and he had her back. Just as she had his.

And it was all bundled up, anyway. It was a miracle to have Logan back, but she’d grown while he was gone. She wasn’t that scared little girl anymore, and he looked at her with an ill-conceived amazement that made her feel uneasy, because she wasn’t perfect. She made mistakes; she’d made a lot of mistakes with Gabby, for instance. And she didn’t put Logan on a pedestal anymore, knowing his shortcomings, but he seemed to be putting her on one –

Yes, she knew she had to talk with Logan soon.

“We’re getting sidetracked,” Old Logan said, still watching her; then he glanced at her brother and father, who shook themselves.

“Yes, sorry.” Logan sighed. Daken brushed an arm against hers, perhaps seeking comfort, perhaps seeking to comfort her; he must have sensed some of her inner turmoil. “Remus, obsessed with me,” Logan summarized. "Got it.”

He seemed unfazed; he was, after all, accustomed to such things. Romulus himself had planned half his life, so it wasn’t a stretch of the imagination to think Remus held similar interests.

“Not like you’re thinking,” Jimmy interjected. He sat with his arms crossed, his alert eyes jumping between the two counterparts. “I agree with Old Logan, but there’s something else. She came to you, specifically, both times. This last time she ignored your partners and made advances. And in your fragmented memories she seemed to be all over you, right?”

The telepaths had taken a look. The memories of working with the twins and deciding to undergo the Weapon X experiment weren’t fabrications, apparently, but they were also hazy, as if Logan hadn’t been himself at the time.

What Jimmy was implying –

“You think she... wants Logan?” Laura said quietly, leaning forward. It wasn’t, perhaps, a stretch of the imagination; as Jimmy had pointed out, she’d acted possessively. Both Kurt and Ororo held an uneasy air as they reported the encounter.

Logan’s gaze jumped between all of them, his brow furrowed.

“She ‘got’ me already.” He shook his head, his nose crunched. “After Romulus was taken care of. We... celebrated.”

Old Logan snorted. “Can’t say we’re difficult to sleep with, son, but even I would think twice at
rolling in the hay with someone related to this fella.” Romulus either didn’t exist in his world or had never shown himself; Laura hoped for the former. She wondered if Daken even existed in Old Logan’s world, but they hadn’t gotten that far as to talk about his mother, at least not to her knowledge. “You were careless.”

Logan shrugged. “I wasn’t thinking with my brain, evidently. She’s stunning –”

“Yes,” Old Logan laughed, “You don’t need to explain to us how it works, son.”

Daken still hadn’t offered any insight; that was strange. As the others kept talking about Remus, Laura turned to watch him. She found him almost withdrawn, a distant look in his eyes. He met her gaze and shook his head, crossing both legs and arms.

Not at all placated, nonetheless Laura could recognize that this wasn’t the time. She tuned back to the conversation: they were still debating what had possessed Logan to sleep with Remus.

Despite a few uncomfortable comments, they discarded the idea that Remus herself could have put the thought in him. Braddock had already checked, apparently, when Logan had expressed doubts. Remus hadn’t tried anything while Logan was under Romulus’ sway, decades before; and even though, when she’d sought out Logan’s “help” to stop Romulus, she’d most certainly confounded him, she also hadn’t done anything to make him bed her.

“She’s taken with you, enough that she doesn’t want to overtly manipulate you,” Jimmy said. Old Logan looked pensive; Logan’s eyebrows were reaching his hairline. “This gives us an edge. She is bound to reach out to you again, eventually. And when she does –”

“- we’ll be ready.” Old Logan nodded. “We should interrogate her twin, too. See what he has to say about her.”

“He’ll lie,” Logan said. “The minute he understands we’re looking for her.”

“Or perhaps he’ll want to get back at her. No?” Jimmy’s gaze run over them all, stuttering on Daken before reaching Logan. He must have sensed there was something wrong; Laura, too, was frazzled, the silence beside her deafening, eerie, and ultimately worrying. By this point – with such an overt mention of his old tormentor – Daken should have been reacting in some – any – way. But there was nothing.

Was he holding back to avoid confrontation on the subject, mindful of his breakdown in this very room just a few days prior? Or had he made some peace with what Romulus had done to him?

No. Even if Laura wanted nothing more than for him to finally face and overcome that trauma, she knew that wasn’t the case, not yet at least. Was he pushing it all under the carpet again? Or perhaps he was still thinking about Roston -?

She met Logan’s gaze. He, too, his brow furrowed, was surreptitiously glancing at Daken. No reaction even to that; Laura bit her lower lip and threw her brother a look. He just shook his head again.

She exhaled.

“Even if he’s pissed with her, he could still lie,” Logan said, returning his gaze to the others. “I wouldn’t trust anything he says.”

“We have telepaths, though,” Old Logan pointed out. “They got the truth out of him already, I say let them squeeze him for this too.”
And that was the end of it. They decided that, for now, they’d wait for Hank’s results and ask Jean or Braddock to go to the prison again – Rachel was still out of the question, apparently. It seemed that Jean wanted to protect her daughter from the brunt of Romulus’ overbearing mind, especially with the way Rachel had taken to heart Daken’s plight and the way she’d reacted while they were all in Daken’s mind.

Daken got up and left without a word.

Laura exchanged a glance with Logan; he nodded at her, obviously afraid of being too overbearing and shattering what he’d so recently built with Daken.

She went after her brother.

She found him climbing the stairs; for a moment, recalling that Johnny Storm was coming over in a few hours, she thought he wanted to go get changed in his room – and brood alone in the darkness without asking for help – but he appeared to be heading for Jean’s office.

That alone was a relief.

He accepted her presence at his side without comment; she followed him silently for a few minutes. Finally, as they reached his destination, she spoke up.

“You got very quiet at the end there.”

Daken hummed. “I was talking with Grey.”

Well, that was even better. It meant he’d recognized he was upset and reacted accordingly.

“Is everything all right?” Laura murmured. It was amazing he was seeking and getting professional help, but she was still his sister. She was there for him.

Daken finally turned to face her. His features were… soft, as he regarded her. He thrust his hands in his pockets. “I’m sorry I worried you. I -” he hesitated. “I don’t want to overwhelm you. It’s not fair to you.”

“But I’m here for you,” she said stupidly. She felt hollowed inside. She had his back. She’d always had.

He was finding others to hold onto. And it was beautiful and she was glad but it saddened her, too.

“I know.” He reached out, caught her arms. “You’ve always had. And you always will. But you can’t take all my problems on your shoulders, Laura, I can’t let you,” he said softly. “I won’t do that to you. You have your life and I burdened you enough.” She nodded mutely. She got it, she really did. And it filled her with such joy to see him thrive, to see him heal, but they were family. They had each other.

“You never burdened me,” she said, because it was true. She’d always been there for him, ever since their fateful meeting in Madripoor. They were blood.

More than they’d initially thought.

Daken smiled. “Thank you. But I’m… still not sure, myself. I’m doing a lot of thinking, Laura.” He squeezed her arms. “When I know what this is, I’ll tell you. I promise.”

Again, she nodded. He looked pensive, amazed and confused, in turmoil. Something had touched
him. Something they’d said in the conference room, perhaps? His silence had begun as they talked about Remus. He’d said he didn’t know her; perhaps he’d suddenly remembered that he did?

After all, whatever he’d been mulling over had been enough to make him contact Jean –

Jean would take care of it. Of him.

He cocked his head. “Laura?” he murmured. “This goes both ways, you know. You can tell me. What has you so bothered? You’ve been upset for days.” And he was, she could see, hurt that she hadn’t loaded her worries unto him.

And because he was her brother and he was asking and she’d been holding back for days and they were blood, she finally blurted out the truth that had rattled her so. “I’m your sister,” she said, breathless.

Daken’s smile was a radiant, comforting thing. “I know. I’m here for you, too. Let me -”

“No, I’m your sister.” She grabbed at his arms. “While we looked for Logan… Tony Stark found a mutant database… it’s not important.” She took a breath. “Sarah… Sarah Kinney messed with Logan’s DNA more than we thought. She’s my mother.” That, too, she had yet to confront. “She’s genetically my mother. I’m not Logan’s clone, I’m his – their – daughter. I’m your sister, Daken…”

She found herself, suddenly, enveloped by Daken’s arms. She’d watched the journey on his face, the confusion and the understanding and the elation, and now he was pulling her into an embrace, his hold fierce. “You’ve always,” he whispered furiously, “been my sister. Do you hear me?”

A sob escaped her lips, stark relief running in her veins. She hadn’t known how bothered she’d been until now, until she’d confronted him with the truth. “Yes,” she mumbled against his chest.

She’d always clung so hard to her humanity, to those who shared her blood. She’d fought to finally allow herself to see them as family. And all of them had so readily welcomed her, so readily named her their own. There was no need, no need at all for the news to have changed anything… but this final confirmation had taken her breath away. She was a Kinney, and a Howlett, through and through.

They were bound.

She broke the embrace, her cheeks wet. Daken studied her intently, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“You haven’t told Logan,” he stated.

She could only nod mutely.

His gaze softened. “You think this would change anything? He loves you, you know.”

He did. Too much, perhaps, and unconditionally, like she could do no wrong, but – he deserved to know. And yet, and yet…

Daken saw; perhaps she’d made a face. He blinked, obviously taken aback. “For me? You’re holding back on him for me?”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “Jubilee thinks I don’t want to steal your chance with Logan. I think she might be right. This is your moment, you’re finally talking, you’re opening up –”
She trailed off; he was shaking his head.

“You’re not stealing anything,” he murmured. “I might have been jealous of you once… before I met you, when I thought you were just daddy’s little girl.” He grimaced, smelling ashamed at the memory. “But we’re family, Laura. And I’m glad for you.” He bent to place a kiss on her forehead.

She felt her heart constrict.

“Don’t hold back for my sake,” he added, straightening up. “Logan and I… we’re going at our own glacial pace; you can’t possibly want to wait that long.” He smirked, that old trademark smirk of his.

She exhaled. Still, she rolled on the balls of her feet, seeing the melancholy beneath the reassuring façade, the way his body was angled towards Jean’s office.

But… he was right. She didn’t want to put this on him – he was obviously bothered by the idea of loading whatever he was going through on her again. He’d found another outlet, and she could still be there for him while taking care of herself.

She ought to.

“Okay,” she said then. “I’m going. Have a good session.”

He nodded, distracted, his body completing its turn; but then he stopped, a hand around the knob, and looked back at her. “I’m going to be fine, sister. Don’t worry.” He smiled at her, and she believed it.

So she let him go inside.

She exhaled. She’d see Jubilee and check on Gabby and then…

Then, she had a long-postponed meeting to organize.

Chapter End Notes

Next: A daughter and her father.

[I really enjoy writing the sniktblings. I guess you might have already noticed that. Was there a moment you appreciated the most? Let me know what you think, your comments make my day! ^_^]
Some time later, Laura found Logan in the kitchen.

He was having lunch with Ororo and Kurt, obviously trying to hold onto a layer of normalcy. But, just as obviously, he was distracted, fidgeting and looking around from time to time. Ororo sat beside him, her arm brushing comfortingly against his; Kurt, opposite them, had the final part of his tail wrapped around Logan’s calf.

Logan smelt Laura coming and turned to face her as she approached them. Ororo smiled at her and Kurt patted the seat next to him. After a moment of deliberation, Laura sat down. During this, Logan had never stopped staring at her.

“Hey,” he said softly. She cocked her head in greeting. “You… managed to talk with Daken?” Logan asked hesitantly. “Everything all right?”

“He was actually going up to talk with Jean,” Laura explained. Logan visibly relaxed, relieved just as she’d been at the notion that Daken would seek help so readily. “I didn’t keep him.”

“It’s good, right?” Logan looked at his partners. Kurt smiled and nodded.

“It’s very good.” Ororo linked their fingers.

Logan sighed; he returned his attention to Laura. “You want to have lunch with us?” There was a desperate light in his eyes. Of course he’d noticed, over the course of the last few days, that Laura was holding back.

She was here to rectify that.

“No, I don’t want to impose,” she said, because this was still a moment just for the three of them and it was so rare to have some peace; they should enjoy it. Logan’s face fell, but she held up a hand. “But listen, Logan, I was thinking… do you have some time later? I wanted to show you something. And… talk.” She ducked her head.

Logan beamed, utter relief in his features. “Sure, darling. I’d love to.”

They agreed to meet in the hangar in an hour, so she left; she still had to make final arrangements and check in with Gabby. Her sister was ready and excited, her pink backpack full. Laura left her with Jubilee – who was doing her such a big favor, and Laura’s heart swelled with love – and then returned to her room to get changed from her costume.
When she was done she hovered by Daken’s door. He was already back from his session; she’d heard him coming in, and now he was moving in the room, likely getting ready for Storm’s arrival. It seemed that he was adjusting the furniture and fussing over what to wear. It was wonderful to witness him being so lively after worrying herself sick. She knocked.

He opened the door with five different shirts dangling from an arm, three different belts from the other – they’d gone and retrieved some of his clothes from a safehouse earlier that week – and wearing a disheveled look. His hair was wet and it looked like he still hadn’t decided how to style it. He was wearing only onesock.

She couldn’t help it, the tension getting the better of her: she snorted, delighted and relieved. He followed her glance down to his feet and cursed.

He was happy to see her, seemingly more relaxed than earlier that day, but with a pensive expression permanently fixed on his features. Again, she wondered what was happening with him, but she had to trust Jean… and him.

So she told him her plan.

He approved of her idea, and said he’d do his best to be there. Storm was coming, though, so he shoved her unceremoniously out of his room, saying he’d ask for her ‘atrocious advice on clothing’ only when he was ‘truly desperate’ and she was ‘no one to talk’.

Classic defecting, but she’d let him do it. She trusted him.

Twenty minutes later she reached the hangar, Logan waiting for her at the entrance. He followed her to the small jet she’d been assigned and… asked no questions during the flight, apparently content with letting her set the rhythm of their interaction.

Now that they were almost there she felt jittery, but she knew this was the right thing to do. At least the silence wasn’t uncomfortable; they’d always been able to sit quietly for hours on end, especially on rooftops. Death hadn’t taken that away from them.

She landed them in a small clearing and led him past the gates; he did a double take at realizing where they were headed. But he still couldn’t possibly imagine their destination and when, a lump in her throat, she stopped in front of Sarah Kinney’s tomb, she heard his breath stutter in recognition.

He stood beside her, a silent pillar of strength, and waited for her to find her bearings.

She was still so overwhelmed at the sight; so grateful for its existence. She came here as often as she could, which wasn’t as often as she’d have liked; but she hadn’t come since before her discovery, busy as she was first with finding Logan and then with finding Daken, and then hiding behind her worry for both.

There were fresh flowers; her aunt, of course, came much more often.

“When you died,” she began, softly, and Logan shifted, listening to her, “I was so angry. I thought you’d abandoned me; I didn’t know what to do with myself. There were still so many things I wanted to tell you… things I wanted to shout, too. I was…” She wrapped her arms around herself. “…so very angry.”

Logan made a motion – perhaps he wanted to lay a comforting hand on her shoulder – and inhaled to speak. She shook her head.

“No, please, let me talk. I need to get this out of my chest.”
“Sure thing, darling.” Logan’s hand dropped to his side. Laura took a shaky breath.

“I felt abandoned from before your death. You were so hurt by Daken’s death, by your hand in it….” She felt his full-bodied flinch. “You didn’t notice. I was… floating, and you didn’t notice. You’ve always believed I was made of sterner stuff. You took great care of me,” she hastened to say, because she had no intention to hurt him. “But deep down, you’ve always… held me to this high standard. I was the one who’d overcome horrible things and had come out functional. I made mistakes, but you were always there for me… in a way you’ve never been there for Daken, not really.” Logan made a wet, pained sound and she reached out, grasped his hand reassuringly. “I resented that. I felt for him. I was uncomfortable and scared. I pushed you away, too… you didn’t notice. It wasn’t your fault. You were grieving and -” She shook her head. This, she had do dredge out of herself. “For the longest time, I resented you for what happened with Arcade. I thought that if you hadn’t been so caught up in Daken’s death, you’d have noticed I’d disappeared.”

Logan choked out a sob. “Laura, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right.” She squeezed his hand. “I know that was irrational. I’m… I’m not telling you this to hurt you, Logan, I’m so sorry. I just want you to understand what I was going through before you died.” Logan took a breath; she sensed him nod. “And then…” she resumed, “then you were gone. It was hard, Logan. I clung to Daken and I fought and I bled but I found peace, too. And then… when you came back…” She clenched her jaw. “You look at me like I’m this extraordinary thing beyond reproach. I’m human, Logan. I’m just like you. I make mistakes. I resent and I hate and I’m irrational. I’ve been horribly irrational with you ever since you came back. And seeing you look at me like that, like I’m perfect, only exacerbated it and I’m so sorry, Logan. I’m sorry I did this to you. But do you see it? Do you see me for what I am, with all my cracks, and not for what you think I am?” Breathless, she tasted salt on her tongue as her mother’s tomb swam before her vision.

Logan started. “Laura.”

She dried her tears with the back of a hand. “Yes.” She held her breath. Did he see? Did he understand?

“Laura, darling,” Logan breathed. “I’m sorry I made you feel this way. I… I never wanted to hurt you. I’ll do better… I promise.”

She nodded. “I know. I made my peace with all that. And I see you… I know how hard you’re trying, Logan. And it was absurd of me to hold you to this without telling you what was wrong.”

“I understand, darling. I’ll do better.” Logan cleared his throat; he must be holding back tears. She felt for him. “I look at you like that because I’m proud of you, Laura. I’m so, so proud of what you’ve become.” Laura’s chest ached at the statement. She’d surmised that, and it made her feel accomplished, but at the same time it was suffocating. Logan couldn’t do anything by halves. “Exactly because you’ve overcome such terrible things. But I shouldn’t put all that pressure on you. I’m sorry, Laura.” Hesitantly, he stepped beside her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

She melted into his embrace with a sigh. “I love you, dad.”

His breath hitched. “I love you too, darling.”

They stood silent for a while, gazing at her mother’s tomb. When she thought she could be able to speak again, she wet her lips. “It cemented, after you died. That you were my father. That that was how I felt about you. Perhaps I’d tried so hard not to let myself think those words, before, but when you were gone… I regret never telling you.”
“It’s all right, Laura. I’m here now.” Logan squeezed her shoulder. “You’re my daughter. I’ve always thought so. And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you this enough.” He’d adopted her, some time before his death. Made it official. But they’d never exchanged these words.

They’d needed them.

She took a breath. “While we were looking for you,” she began, and in the way she was bracing herself he felt this was something momentous for her, and he kept holding her just right, “we found a mutant database. It got destroyed, but Tony Stark… he was with us… he managed to recover some data.” She paused. Logan waited patiently, even though she could smell he was confused and wondering what she was getting at. “He discovered that Sarah’s DNA mixed with yours, in me. He discovered that I’m not your clone. I’m… she’s my mother,” she choked out, staring in front of her, recalling her mother, her sacrifice. Recalling the warmth of the clone the Orphans of X had tricked her with, an aching nostalgia she still couldn’t dispel. “You’re my father, by blood.”

Logan held his breath. “It makes no difference,” he managed to exhale, even though he held her more tightly. “You’ve always been my daughter.”

“I know.” She laid her head on his shoulder. “But it touched me, Logan. I don’t know if I can explain why, exactly. You’ve always been there for me, and Deborah and Megan always acted like I was family. Daken, too. I don’t think being a clone invalidates all that, Gabby is my sister,” she said fiercely. “But it’s different, knowing that Sarah contributed to me just as much as you. I wonder if she knew… if she did it on purpose.”

She gazed down at her mother’s tomb, her chest aching with love.

“She loved you,” Logan stated simply. Laura shut her eyes, overwhelmed, almost swaying.

“Yes. Yes, she did.” She’d died for Laura. Laura would remember her for as long as she lived. “Anyway, I… I wanted to introduce her to you.” She reached up and caught Logan’s hand, and wrapped her free arm around his waist.

Logan kissed her temple. “And I’m honored, darling. Thank you.”

They stood like that for a while. She felt weightless now, the constriction in her heart gone. She’d needed this; they’d needed this. She was glad she’d relieved herself of that strange feeling and she was glad she’d told Logan. These past few weeks had been a nightmare of jumbled thoughts and words held back. None of them deserved miscommunication and awkward silences. They were bound, and they were family, and they deserved each other.

Eventually they had to move. They disentangled themselves; Logan took a few steps closer to the headstone and bent his head. Laura gave him some space, grateful for the moment; something clenched in her at the sight of her father paying his respects to her mother whom he’d never met. They were her family, and she wouldn’t have it any other way. She was glad, glad to have stitched them all back together.

When he was done he went back to her, his eyes bright with love. “Thank you, Laura. You did me a great honor.”

She smiled. “Do you want to meet the rest of the family?”

She’d asked Deborah if she could bring Logan over; Gabby and Jubilee should be already there. Daken, too, would hopefully come, when he was done with Johnny Storm.

She wanted this so much. She wanted to see her family together, finally, and bask in their sight. She
wanted to be surrounded by them all.

She’d asked Jimmy, too, but he had declined with a grimace, and she understood; she wouldn’t force him to embrace their family.

She looked upon Logan and her father exhaled, his features alight with giddiness and warmth.

“I’d love to, darling. Lead the way.”

Chapter End Notes

Next: Daken bares himself to Johnny.

[You guys. You guys. I’m forever bitter that a whole year after Logan’s return Marvel still hasn’t given us their reunion. Laura was a mess when Logan died, she was so off-kilter. And now they all live together on the island and they still haven’t talked on panel! I hope the new Wolverine writer will see to that. Was there a moment you appreciated the most? Let me know what you think, your comments make my day! ^_^]
Daken bares himself to Johnny.

Chapter Notes

So.
As my long-time readers know, I headcanon Daken as asexual. Ties that bind has already featured some lines that headed in that direction, but this chapter makes it “official”, although the word still isn’t used. The issue will be further explored in later chapters, of course.

Additional Warnings: discussions of emotional/sexual abuse, mention of drug use.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

38.

“We could do something else,” Johnny said softly.

Daken shook his head. “No. No, it’s all right. I need to do this.” He proceeded not to do it, opting instead for resuming his nervous pacing of the room.

Johnny waited patiently, nothing but understanding in his lovely eyes.

He’d arrived on time – Daken had just barely managed to make himself presentable, tying his hair in a bun at the last moment – and Daken had sat him down on a chair and told him he needed to tell him something.

That was ten minutes ago.

Johnny had watched him pace and fidget, push items back and forth on the desk and the dresser, and open his mouth just to close it a million times. And he hadn’t said a word, or looked at his phone, or shown signs of restlessness. He was just there… waiting.

Daken was rattled. He felt out of his depth, his silver tongue resting like lead in his mouth. He felt – he knew – he needed to get things out of his chest, but he was terribly afraid. Perhaps he feared Johnny would just leave, or hate him.

“Just start talking,” Grey had told him gently. “Words will come.”

Easier said than done. And this reluctance was ridiculous, because he wanted Johnny to know him… to truly see him. Johnny still didn’t, really; Daken had always hidden himself behind quips, and manipulation, and bravado. And Johnny deserved the truth. If they were going to do this, anyway.

Whatever this was.

And what he’d been talking about with Grey a few hours ago didn’t help. If his hunch turned out to be true, he had a lot of work ahead of him. If he really wanted Johnny – not as a friend, but as something more – was he prepared to ask Johnny to sacrifice such an important aspect? ... or to
negotiate, maybe; he still didn’t know.

Would it be fair to Johnny?

The real question probably was: did Johnny want whatever this was just as much as him?

Decades of training told Daken that he did. The way he talked, the way he moved... angling himself closer, his breath hitching, his eyelids lowering as he followed Daken’s every movement, a faint blush on his cheeks. His attention wasn’t even exceedingly sexual; Johnny seemed to be more interested in him than his body. It had been Daken to ruin everything in more ways that one, years ago. But here and now, if Johnny were to say he just wanted friendship and occasional sex, that would probably make Daken pause...

- hell, who was Daken kidding, he still would content himself with that just to be close to Johnny – … But Johnny didn’t. He’d proved time and time again that he valued Daken. That he was willing to forgive him… that he’d already done so. That he missed Daken.

And oh, how achingly Daken had missed him.

He just had to take a leap.

“I’m fucked up,” he murmured, coming to a stop in front of Johnny. Johnny started and made to protest, but Daken shushed him gently. “No, it’s just the truth. I’m a certified mess. I’m traumatized, Johnny. I’m working on it, but I’m bound to falter for a long, long time. And I didn’t want... I don’t want to use you like a crutch. I don’t want to use you anymore. I regret what I did to you so much,” he choked out, an unbearable weight in his chest as Johnny’s gaze turned gentle. “So much, Johnny. I hate that I hurt you.”

“I know,” Johnny interjected softly, “You told me.”

Daken really ought to ask Grey if she could dredge out of him the memories of his phone calls to a dead man’s phone.

“Well, I can’t never say it enough times.” Daken balled his fists. “And that doesn’t... doesn’t count. It wasn’t a conscious decision, I was rambling.”

“I’d say it counts. It was you, unfiltered. It was what you felt.” Johnny laced his fingers in his lap. “But I get what you mean. This right here is a conscious decision to hold yourself accountable.”

“Yes,” Daken exhaled. Johnny got it. “Let me say it and remember it this time. I’m sorry, Johnny.” Just saying it made him breathe easier. “I’m sorry I hurt you and your family.”

“I accept you apology,” Johnny said easily. “Can I say something?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.” Daken found he needed the brief respite; he fell heavily upon the bed, his eyes never leaving Johnny’s face.

Johnny cocked his head. “I’ve had... my long share of people hurting me. Emotionally, I mean.” He grimaced, and Daken wanted to brutally murder whoever had Johnny looking like that. “And using me. I’ll tell you, one day. But I’m sure of one thing; I’m more mature, now.” Johnny’s gaze turned pensive. “I know what I’m getting myself into, Daken. I know you’re... hurt, and struggling. It doesn’t scare me. I want to be there for you, truly, if you let me. Not as a crutch, as a... support. Right beside you.”
Daken’s breath caught. He had to shut his eyes, overwhelmed. He felt an encouraging brush against his mind – Grey was checking his surface thoughts, though she’d said she wouldn’t listen. He must be broadcasting how intensely and terribly he was feeling.

God, he wanted. He wanted so much. He wanted Johnny.

“I want to give you everything,” he dredged out of himself, opening his eyes. Johnny was gazing upon him adoringly. Daken was suddenly starkly, gloomily glad he hadn’t regained the use his pheromones yet, or he just knew that he’d find himself questioning the validity of Johnny’s feelings. “I’m scared. I’m scared I’ll scare you.” That, too, was good to say out loud.

“Nothing you say will make me feel any less about you,” Johnny breathed. They still hadn’t said… Neither of them had dared to utter anything. But was that how Daken felt? He didn’t… he didn’t know. He had to find out.

“I’m seventy,” he blurted out, because he had to start from something. “I was born in 1946.”

Johnny’s smile was the brightest, softest thing Daken had ever witnessed. “Okay.” He was half Daken’s age, but that didn’t seem to be deterring him.

“My pheromones… when they come back. If they come back.” Perhaps it would be easier if they didn’t. Could he live without them? If it made Johnny stay, could the loss be worth his peace of mind? “We’ll have to be careful. I don’t want to influence you. Ever.”

“We’ll play it by ear.” Johnny just kept smiling, reverent and overjoyed. It was stunning. It took Daken’s breath away, made his heart clench. “I trust you.”

Daken grasped at his knees, knowing what had to come next. It was inevitable: Johnny was a hero.

“I killed,” he said. “I killed so many people. I… I liked it, Johnny.”

“I know, Daken.” Here, Johnny did seem vaguely uncomfortable, but then he leant towards him with an encouraging smile. “We’ll work something out. You’re working on that, too? With Jean Grey?”

That was a whole other can of worms. One he’d sworn to tell Johnny, too.

“I was trained to kill from when I was ten. I don’t know how much of my liking it comes from that.” Laura had never liked it, though. It must be in him… it hadn’t been the result of the training. After all: “I had killed before,” he confessed.

Johnny’s eyes flashed. Daken could see the struggle in them: rage on Daken’s behalf, wonder at what had transpired to make him a murderer so young. And Daken didn’t want to make excuses. But Grey had made him see how masterfully he’d been set up, too.

“I killed a bully,” he began. “I was bullied, growing up. After my mother’s death I was dropped on a pair’s doorstep. It was a village in Japan. I was a mixed child in post-war, rural Japan.” He wrapped his arms around himself. He wanted to look anywhere but at Johnny, but he wouldn’t flee from this. He’d sworn to tell Johnny everything, let him decide with all the information. “Then I killed my adoptive brother. An infant. My adoptive mother wanted to replace me. She was scared of my pheromones, terrified. I couldn’t control them…” He shut his eyes. They’d fucked it all up, that was the truth. He would have always been a stranger in that house, people would have always wondered if he was the result of one of them cheating or worse, but Akihira had loved him. If there hadn’t been pheromones, if Natsumi hadn’t felt the anger and pain he was feeling, without understanding what was happening to her… she’d have been manageable, perhaps. Softer. “And I killed my adoptive mother by accident,” he finished the list, his fists tightening around the fabric of the duvet. “She tried
to kill me when she discovered what I’d done to her child. My claws came out for the first time. And then my father… he shot himself.”

Something touched his fingers and he jumped, his eyes fleeing open. Johnny was kneeling on the floor in front of him, a hand gingerly laid on Daken’s… nothing but warmth and understanding in his eyes. It was almost too much.

Almost.

“What happened to you was terrible,” Johnny said, his fingers brushing reverently against the back of Daken’s hand. “I can’t… I won’t hold you accountable for anything that happened, Daken. You were so small and you were alone.”

“My father loved me,” Daken choked out, lost in the sensation of Johnny’s warm hand. “It should have been enough.”

Johnny shook his head. “You were trapped… controlled from the shadows. You were never going to come out on top.” That was exactly what Grey had told him… Romulus had set him up to fail. Put him where he would form cracks already, so as to make him more receptive. He might even have been lurking from the shadows…

Nothing Romulus ever did was accidental.

Johnny’s words caught up with him. “Wait. You know about -” Daken trailed off, dreading to evoke such a cursed presence between them. Had he mentioned Romulus on those phone calls, too?

“I know that this... man,” Johnny grimaced, “this monster trained you to kill since you were a kid. And I know he’s in prison now. Last week Pryde thought he’d had to do with Soteira,” he explained, “so she told us -”

“I loved him.” Daken had to say it quickly, because if he stopped to think about what he was saying, he’d never do it.

He began shaking.

It was the darkest, most terrible truth, one he hadn’t yet addressed with Grey. But Grey knew anyway. Grey, and Braddock, and Summers: they all knew; they’d seen it in his mind. And in Romulus’, probably. That was the truth, the real horror.

Johnny inhaled, perhaps to tell him that it was all right… that of course anyone would love the man who brings them up, regardless of how much they get hurt. But reality was much more sordid, and horrifying.

“He groomed me, Johnny. From when I was ten. The only person I’ve ever been in love with,” his voice cracked, “… is the monster who took me and made me bleed. He was my everything even though I was terrified of him… My everything . Master, torturer, lover. For decades.” He shuddered and bit the inside of his cheek, tasting his blood to ground him to the earth, to Johnny’s hand, to Johnny’s warmth.

Johnny was staring up at him, wide-eyed, his breath caught in his throat… his hand still gently holding Daken’s even though Daken was sure his claws were breaking his skin. Johnny squeezed his hand, and Daken exhaled.

And the dam fucking broke .
“I just wanted him to love me,” he gasped. “And he took that love and used it to bind me closer to him, to control me. He made me his. I’m so scared I’ll always be his. I’m scared I don’t know how to love. I don’t want him to be my only one, Johnny,” he choked out, tears filling his eyes. “I want to love you like you deserve. I want to love like love ought to be. Clean, and right. I want to give you something good and I don’t know if I can –” He gasped for breath and found none, a lump in his throat, bile and mucus in his nose. He was drowning in pain and misery, could distantly feel a gentle cocoon enveloping his mind; but it was the sudden arms around him as the mattress dipped with a new weight that made him feel safe.

Johnny was holding him, tight and sure and warm, and Daken clung to him, his fingers digging into Johnny’s shoulders. He buried his face in the crook of Johnny’s neck and sobbed, loud and unrestrained, crying like he’d never been allowed to, like he’d learnt to quench young. He was an emotionally constipated mess and what was he thinking, saddling Johnny with this? Johnny didn’t deserve any of this. He deserved so, so much more…

Daken hiccuped. Oh, God, he’d said he loved Johnny. He’d said it. But was it real? Was it like love, real love, ought to be, or was he just clinging to the affection he felt for the man?

Was anything real or was he just a sad little puppet?

No, he wasn’t. He was a person. He’d never been a puppet. He was a person and he was healing and he’d take this back too. He’d claim it back.

He’d heal and spit in Romulus’ face.

Slowly, his sobs quietened down. He loosened his grip, too, afraid he’d hurt Johnny, but Johnny wasn’t breathing with discomfort, his body fitting perfectly against Daken’s… as if it belonged there.

“Is this okay?” Johnny murmured. He was brushing his fingers against Daken’s head, and Daken squinted his eyes, taken by the gentle comfort that felt so different from the mocking gestures he used to be subjected to. This felt right.

“Yes,” he exhaled. He’d reclaim this too. He’d reclaim all the gestures that had made him melt in Romulus’ presence, that had bound him to the bastard – begging for scraps like a mutt.

He wasn’t a mutt.

He’d never been a mutt.

Johnny kept caressing his head, his voice low and calm and comforting. “Of course you can love. You love your sisters, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Daken nuzzled Johnny’s neck. “I wasn’t talking about that,” he mumbled.

“It’s all right,” Johnny murmured. “We’ll work it out, Daken. We’ll work everything out. Together.”

Together. Daken choked on hope and love. Hesitantly, he tilted back his head to see Johnny. Johnny was looking at him… it struck him dead, how Johnny was looking at him. So tender, so open, so focused.

They gazed at each other. Daken’s hair had escaped its bounds while he cried all over Johnny, and Johnny brushed strands of it away from Daken’s face. A sound escaped Daken’s mouth; wet and frail and utterly vulnerable.

The air shifted. Johnny cupped his cheek and Daken wanted, God, wanted…
“Can I kiss you?” Johnny murmured and Daken nodded, his heart flitting against his chest like a caged bird. He felt utterly out of his depth. It hadn’t ever been like this, he usually initiated, but he knew that this, this was real. It was the only real thing he’d ever felt. Johnny bent his head.

He was hesitant, delicate. He tasted like cinnamon.

They’d kissed before, that night, that terrible night when Daken had almost destroyed everything good that was between them… the night he’d realized he cared – and fled. That kiss had been carnal; it had tasted of deceit and regret.

This kiss was slow and careful, a precious gift. Their mouths met and parted in a fragile, gentle dance and it felt like home, to brush their lips together… to be held so close, with such care, with no rush; to share their breaths, hesitant, soft, and true. He clung to Johnny, and he knew he never wanted this to end.

Eventually Johnny broke the kiss, gasping for breath. He was flushed, so beautiful as he pressed their foreheads together, their noses bumping, his fingers threading Daken’s hair. His eyes were so bright, his smile so soft.

He pressed his lips to the angle of Daken’s mouth and Daken lost it. Oh, such ache, such longing! He yearned, his body vibrating with need. He clung to Johnny, pressing his forehead to Johnny’s temple, brushing feverish kisses against Johnny’s jaw that Johnny tried to meet in kind and how lovely, to feel those lips on his cheeks, on his eyelids. He was nearly in Johnny’s lap; he wanted to feel every inch of him, to be held. He straddled Johnny’s leg, brought him closer… chest to chest. He could easily hear Johnny’s frantic heartbeat, but he wanted to feel it vibrate against him too. This was what he’d missed… what he’d had, for a small, fleeting, blessed moment on a rooftop under the sky.

On a rooftop…

He realized now that they were pressed far too close for Johnny’s body not to react; it had been foolish of him not to think of the consequences, so safe he’d felt in Johnny’s arms. Now Johnny was getting excited, his breathing on the side of erratic; he was slightly jolting his hips, seeking friction, and he’d get it if Daken pressed his knee just a bit forward, and Daken… Daken could let the moment follow its course. He could let Johnny have this, and tell him another time – when he was clearer-headed, perhaps. After all, he didn’t think he actively disliked what was happening.

But neither did he actively want it.

He couldn’t begin this… this relationship with another deception. He’d decided to be truthful; and that meant telling Johnny everything. Even if he still wasn’t sure he even understood.

So he tilted his head back, stopping his frenzied kisses; and he disentangled their legs. “I’m sorry… No,” he whispered. His heart gave a stutter he definitely needed to deconstruct.

Johnny gazed at him, flushed and glazed-eyed, but he stayed put. And that, more than anything else, told Daken that he was the one.

“No, I’m sorry,” Johnny murmured. “I shouldn’t have done that.” He winced, a question and an apology in his eyes, and made to pull back, but Daken held him close, their legs brushing.

“Stay,” he breathed. “It’s all right. I enjoy staying like this. If you do too,” he added, feeling uncharacteristically shy. God, Johnny made a fumbling mess of him.

“Yeah. I do.” Johnny moved his hand from Daken’s cheek to his hair, resuming his gentle caress. “What is it?” he asked, more perceptive than he’d ever been.
Daken took a breath, a hand running to Johnny’s arm. “I… I don’t know how I feel about sex.”

How absurd that idiotic comments about his father’s exploits and far more worrying doubts about the morality of Romulus’ sister had struck him like lightning; he’d found himself tuning everyone out, only present enough to shake his head at Laura’s questioning and increasingly worried glances, as his whole life flashed before him and he found himself questioning whether he’d ever even felt sexual attraction. He… didn’t think so. He felt pretty sure that there had never been any overwhelming urge to get in anyone’s pants. Once in bed he liked sex as much as anyone, he supposed, but it had never been anything more than means to an end, or a pleasant enough distraction. It wasn’t what he craved.

Over the years, he’d recalled there in that stupid conference room – what a place and moment to have an epiphany in! - he’d formed fleeting connections away from Romulus’ shadow and sex had always been involved because of course it had… but he’d never been overcome with the desire to jump in bed with any of them, had he? In fact he seemed to think, to feel, to distantly remember that maybe, maybe… it was the quiet moments afterwards that he’d really looked forward to. When it was for a job he never stayed for long, but he’d always liked post-coital snuggles. It was an intimacy he could never hope to achieve without having sex first. He’d always craved the contact, wasn’t it? God, even with Romulus, whose bed he’d climbed in his desperate quest for affection, he was head over heels when allowed to stay in the monster’s arms.

So this was what he wanted… to hold and be held, to lose himself in Johnny’s arms. He was willing to compromise, but first… he had to understand himself.

It could just be that the trauma had finally caught up to him. But he didn’t think it was that. He truly thought there was something there, something he’d always pushed down. He wanted to know.

He hoped Johnny would wait. And Johnny was doing exactly that; he was looking at him with no revulsion, no shock… just waiting for him to elaborate.

Daken sighed. He wasn’t exactly sure what to say; he and Grey hadn’t covered much ground that morning. “I was… trained to use every means necessary to obtain what I wanted. Even my body.”

Johnny’s eyes flashed with anger and horror, his hold tight and comforting. “It’s not a chore,” Daken reassured him, “It’s… pleasant enough, but it’s not… I don’t know if it’s what I want. I don’t know if I go through with it because I want to or because I was taught to. But I don’t think…” He swallowed. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt attraction like that. I do want you -” he held on to Johnny, almost panicked, seeking revulsion in Johnny’s eyes but still finding none.

“It’s okay,” Johnny said quietly. Then he shook his head. “I mean, it’s definitely not okay, what was done to you.” His gaze turned sad, his arms still strong and sure around Daken. “But it’s all right, Daken. If you never want to have sex. Is that why -” Johnny caught himself.

Daken looked up at him. His chest was fluttering painfully, the wind taken out of him at hearing that assurance. But how could Johnny just accept this? How could he keep holding him, caressing him, gazing so warmly at him?

“Why what?” he questioned.

Johnny shook himself. “That night,” he murmured, and blushed violently. He didn’t need to elaborate; the night Daken had made a mess of things; the night he’d sucked Johnny off to tie him to himself. He was still so ashamed of it. Had Johnny understood it had been done with something in mind?

“I was trying to bind you to me,” he confessed, lowering his gaze. God. He’d ruined everything,
hadn’t he?

“I’d gotten that,” Johnny said softly, brushing his knuckles against Daken’s chin and then tilting Daken’s head up. There was no hate, no disgust in his eyes. “And then you gave yourself to me unreservedly,” he murmured.

Daken furrowed his brow, confused.

“I tried to get you off,” Johnny reminded him, his voice oh so soft. “But you wouldn’t have any of it. All you wanted was to be held. Remember? We stayed just like this.” He brought Daken closer, and brushed a feather-light kiss against his forehead. Daken made that frail sound again, his heart clenching. “This is what you want?” Johnny murmured, mouthing the words against his skin.

Yes. It was; it had been. It seemed that perhaps he’d known, deep down, even then. His mind had been comfortable enough, around Johnny, he’d felt safe enough, to seek what he really wanted.

He nodded, too overwhelmed to speak.

“I’d wondered,” Johnny said softly, still kissing his forehead. “You said…” he caught himself.

“In the voicemails,” Daken surmised. Johnny hummed. “It’s all right. Tell me.”

“You said my embrace was the only moment you’d ever felt safe in your entire life.” Johnny kissed his temple. “That you only wished to be able to hold me again.”

That was… a lot. Daken chuckled wetly. “Outed by drugs, huh?”

“Yeah.” Johnny smiled; Daken could feel the curve of his lips against his skin. “It’s all right, Daken. I don’t want you for your body.” He kissed Daken’s jaw. “I want you. However you want.”

While he couldn’t ask for anything more, it wasn’t right to Johnny. “I’m not putting sex out of the table, I -”

“You want to figure yourself out. It’s all right,” Johnny repeated. “We can do that together. One step at a time.”

One step at a time. Together.

Johnny understood.

He understood, and he wasn’t deterred. He wanted this, he wanted Daken, he wanted to try. Baggage and trauma included.

“All right,” Daken said. He snuggled against Johnny again, content with the warmth and the closeness and Johnny’s beautiful understanding, Johnny’s affection -

His love?

Daken trailed his fingers down Johnny’s arm, clasped Johnny’s hand. Watching their fingers laced together was an experience. “There’s another thing,” he murmured, almost dozing off with happiness.

“Tell me anything,” Johnny said.

And God, he meant that. Daken’s heart swelled.
“My name was Akihiro,” he said out loud for the first time in decades. He’d been thinking about this since the day before, since his conversation with Logan. Grey had encouraged him to try it out. And it felt fitting to do so with Johnny; to reclaim another thing from Romulus, one piece at a time. “My adoptive father… he gave me that name. I lost it… well, it was taken from me.” Like so, so many things.

He wasn’t a mutt. He wasn’t a mongrel.

He looked up and Johnny was gazing intently at him, tenderly. With the utmost attention and love.

Daken took a breath.

“Would you call me Akihiro?”

Chapter End Notes

Next: Logan puts his foot in his mouth.

[Whew. This was obviously an important chapter, very packed with information. It was a conversation that was a long time coming, a few seeds planted here and there throughout the story even when I wasn’t so sure myself if I should tackle this subject again. And then there’s the asexuality. I feel strongly about this, to me Daken (well… Akihiro ^-^ ) is asexual. This isn’t the end of it, of course, the subject will come out again. I do know this isn’t a widely accepted headcanon, though. I hope you’ll all stay on this train! Was there a scene you liked the most? Let me know in the comments! I’d love to know what you think ^-^ ]

End Notes

Comments are always welcome. Do tell me your thoughts! ^-^

Always feel free to let me know if there’s a tag missing from this work. It’s important to me that everything is in order.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!